Whither Literary Onomastics?
"Prufrock" Revisited

Michel Grimaud

The dominant literary onomastic tradition has been to search for the hidden symbolic meaning of names. We place this tradition within a broader and, potentially, more fruitful dual perspective: that of general onomastics and that of contemporary literary theory. As an example, my own (1977) reading of the name "Prufrock" is integrated into what I now see as a more significant and pervasive use of naming in T. S. Eliot's poem. Other approaches are discussed briefly and are accompanied by a list of annotated references.

The Broad Scope of Onomastics

One year after publishing my first article – on names in Victor Hugo ("L'onomastique des Misérables," 1976) – I ceased and desisted. But I had had time to commit a second onomastic crime, a paper on "J. Alfred Prufrock" and other names in English and French literature ("Hermeneutics," 1977). Between 1978 and 1985, I did not publish in the field of onomastics, one major reason being that the "Hermeneutics" article had made it all too clear, to me at least, that research in the potential symbolic meanings of literary names was unlikely to reflect the reader's experience of the text; was all too often facile; and ordinarily failed to be central to a study of the major aspects of a literary text – i.e., those which, as critics, we ought to concentrate on first. Moreover, ways of arriving at the symbolic meaning of names were not

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only too easy, they were methodologically weak and unconvincing in most cases. Thus, I was in a quandary: What else could one do if one was committed to the study of names and naming?

By 1985, I had a clearer concept of what might be accomplished not only in literary onomastics but also in the field of general onomastics. As a consequence, I undertook a four-pronged approach to onomastic research. (References, with a brief description of contents, are found in the Annotated Bibliography). First, I surveyed the field of narrative and, in a series of four articles, proposed different ways of looking at naming within story telling. One of the main points was the need to integrate the study of proper names within a discursive framework of actual usage, thus taking fully into account the many ways we refer to people and address them: proper names of various kinds (from first names to nicknames) but also pronouns, titles, endearments, and descriptions. Which categories or combinations thereof are used, when, and why — within a genre, an author, a period, or a particular language or culture, those I saw as basic questions in need of detailed answers.

In a series of three other pieces, I examined the interplay between various terms of address such as titles, first names, and last names in their various combinations, including the use of "tu" and "vous" in French. I showed that actual usage (for example, the use of a title with a first name as in "Monsieur Victor") did not correspond with standard hypotheses. The rationale for metaphorical or extended uses of titles such as "Mr. Donut" for an American doughnut franchise and "Monsieur Drogue" for the French drug czar were also discussed. These more abstract analyses were applied to the plays of Victor Hugo in order to show that the use of terms of reference and especially address is vital to an understanding of conversation and of course of plays, since dramatic language is restricted to dialogue.

The previous two approaches deal only with anthroponyms. In a series of four papers (three of which were written with my colleague Lawrence Baldwin), toponyms — especially street names — are the object of study. The methodological goal was to introduce a variety a standard social scientific tools to the study of naming; a second one was to show that street naming could

become a more interesting and complex field of study. Unfortunately, the book-length version of this project, "A History of Street Naming," will not be written because of circumstances beyond our control.

Finally, in keeping with my hope to nudge onomastics towards broader multidisciplinary and multimethodological approaches, I wrote two lengthy position papers – one on the potential scope of general onomastics and one on literary onomastics. The first piece detailed what is done under the name of onomastics but focused especially on onomastics as it is practiced under various other names in a dozen disciplines of the social and cognitive sciences. Over 150 bibliographic citations were furnished so that, for any one of the topics mentioned in the paper, readers might refer to the best pieces on the subject. In the same spirit, the paper entitled "Onomastics and the Study of Literature" attempts to enlarge the scope of literary onomastic practice by listing a score of broad areas of research that ought to be considered an integral part of the study of names and naming in literature. In this paper, onomastics (and, by extension, literary onomastics) is defined as a study of the "psychological and social process of naming" real and imaginary objects, predominantly persons and places; it is "the historical and synchronic study – in reference and address – of proper names and their placeholders (from pronouns to nominal anaphors, and from titles to descriptions)" (19).

"The Love Song" Revisited

Under this new dispensation, what if anything could an onomast want to say about "Prufrock?" Not what I myself wrote on the name in the 1977 piece on "Hermeneutics..." where I succumbed to the critic's temptation to show off and forgot to argue whether my interpretations were central or not to a reading of the poem. In this respect Professor Robert Fleissner's piece in the present issue of *Names* is far too generous. But as I think he gently suggests, sub rosa, it is difficult to accept or to discount many if not all of the specific interpretations proposed.

The reasons are straightforward: hermeneutic practices are overly powerful and language is overly rich in potential for word play. As a consequence, in the hands of an imaginative and

knowledgeable modern critic, a powerful tool applied to a rich medium cannot but generate a plethora of plausible symbolic interpretations. Moreover, since we know that many (not all) writers were fascinated by names, it makes general sense to expect play on names. Unfortunately, the leap from making general sense to defending convincingly a particular interpretation is a difficult move – one indeed that may become persuasive only when an author's whole work is studied and when recurring structures can be shown to be prevalent throughout. Of course, genre and period considerations are also basic to such an approach but the challenge is perhaps as follows:

– Less weight might be given to play on names, while acknowledging its existence: see, for example, minor characters in Dickens;

– When name play is studied, we need more methodological rigor in articulating when, in what ways, and to what extent the symbolic analysis of names is relevant to a particular work, genre, or period (see "Discourse Anaphora");

– More weight might be given to ways in which onomastics is central to the study of literature (see "Onomastics and... literature").

Take "Prufrock" and some of the more "obvious" interpretations of the name. It makes sense to think of "proof" for a Prufrock bent on seeking the solid rock of truth; it makes sense for the word "frock" to be in the name of someone whose sexual identity is in question: but even those interpretations are only loosely related to the text and would tend to elicit from a hostile reader the query: So what? Who cares? In what way does this revelation of multiple hidden meanings in a name enrich in a significant way my reading of the "Love Song"?

For a reader reading this particular poem, it seems to me that there is no significant enrichment. Play on the name in the title – however important (but also marginal) a title may be – is certainly not why we think that the "Love Song" is a successful poem. However, if one were to discover numerous similar phenomena in that poem and in others by Eliot, then a pattern would emerge. And intertextual patterning may occasionally play a not insignificant role in one's readings. More to the point, however, noticing

such patterns is likely to lead us to the psychology of creation. There is good evidence that some writers work (whether consciously or not is essentially irrelevant) at finding the "right" names for their characters (see "Discourse Anaphora"). But such an approach deals with writerly rather than readerly concerns: only for literary critics, not for non-professional readers, can this ever – if at all – become a lived part of one's experience of the text.

This being the case, instead of digging deeper for further hidden treasures, I would like to focus on two typical issues central to the "Love Song" and to literary onomastics:

– What are the cultural worlds and social milieus (e.g., class) evoked by the names present in the poem?

– What forms of reference and address for self and others does the author have his narrator use?

And therefore, overall, how do these choices structure what is communicated by the poem?

First, the title is of course striking in its pairing of the traditional words "love song" with a full-dress, tripartite name, "J. Alfred Prufrock." A full name evokes the social world rather than a romantic world and an opening initial like "J." was, at the time, more typical of Boston Brahmins than of ordinary people – thus also introducing a notation concerning social class.

When one moves from title to poem, the contrast is striking: the neatness of the title (even with its tensions) makes way for an apparent interior monologue where characters come and go in somewhat confusing manner. But the proper Bostonian social world evoked by the titular name certainly fits nicely in a poem where the speaker makes his visits and measures out his life with coffee spoons.

Still, the major naming point is that, after providing us with a seemingly limpid title, the poem thoroughly confuses identity by using the pronouns of reference and address "us" and "you and I," which put the reader on an intimate footing within the universe of the poem but, on the other side, provide insufficient information about the protagonists, especially the "you." In short, much of the ambiguity engendered by the poem is due to the decision to use

pronouns rather than other identity markers that would more easily lift ambiguities. The author's choice of such a narrative voice for the speaker's self-presentation (and the presentation of the "you") has consequences throughout the poem and thus characterizes one of its most important aspects — one which is onomastic in the sense of the term quoted above.

Further difficulties occur with pronouns such as "you" in "to lead you" (see II. 10, 57) where the pronoun may or may not mean "one." But a second pervasive feature of the text is worth exploring, the nature of its onomastic universe: who is named and who remains nameless; whose identity is defined and whose is not. Two of the main categories will be listed here. First there are those apparently central people who nonetheless appear as through a fog: e.g., women (l. 13), "they" and "them" (ll. 41, 49), "voices" and "eyes" (ll. 52, 55), "her head" (l. 98), "mermaids" and "sea-girls" (ll. 129, 135). In all these cases persons are referred to in general terms or identified merely by a feature such as voice. There are also more descriptive cases such as the "lonely men" (l. 72) and especially the "eternal Footman" (l. 86), with his capitalized "F" as well as the clearcut "attendant lord" (l. 117) and "Fool" (l. 124) — who all deserve further discussion as significant naming choices and allusions.

Most strikingly perhaps, the onomastic universe is rich in references to major cultural figures to whom Prufrock is implicitly or explicitly compared. Michelangelo at first, then — allusively but transparently — Salome and John the Baptist, all three powerful cultural references and significant personae who can help us define Prufrock's identity ("I am no prophet," l. 85) and the set of figures that inhabit his emotional and mental world. Then come two onomastic self-definitions, "I am Lazarus" (l. 96) and "I am not Prince Hamlet" (l. 116). Few names could be more significant in the Christian tradition on the one hand and in the English tradition on the other.

Of course, an account of the speaker's strategies in the "Love Song" would require more than the present cursory remarks. For example, why are Lazarus and Hamlet mentioned by name whereas Salome and John the Baptist are merely alluded to descriptively? The speaker seems to remain in some ways an

indistinct "I" and yet he defines himself, somewhat surprisingly perhaps, through comparisons with the most compelling figures of Western civilization.

In short, key aspects of "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" are defined onomastically but not within the tradition of symbolic interpretations. Although there is no reason to exclude the search for hidden references in a character's name or in the name of a place; or to exclude explanations of how hidden meanings may summarize the essence of character or plot – I do want to argue that there are many other onomastic routes to be taken, some of which encompass more perspicuous and pervasive aspects of language; as such they are more central to our understanding of a text's success as a piece of literature.

Annotated Bibliography

"De Victor Hugo à Homère-Hogu: L'onomastique des Misérables." *L'Esprit Créateur* 16 (1976): 220-230. A study of personal names in Victor Hugo's masterpiece, with emphasis on the main character, Jean Valjean. The study is in the treasure-digging tradition: discovering the hidden meaning of a character's name and showing how it summarizes central features of plot or character.

"Hermeneutics, Onomastics and Poetics in English and French Literature." MLN 92 (1977): 888-921. Within the treasure-digging, hidden-meaning tradition. Discusses mostly texts by Victor Hugo, but includes a study of naming in T. S. Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock."

"Compétence narrative et nom propre." In M. Collot et al., *L'Homme qui rit*. Paris: SEDES, 1985. The first of a continuing series of papers in which I argue for new ways of studying narrative and the role of naming within story telling. The chapter examines who calls whom what: i.e., which ways of naming (from last names to definite descriptions) are chosen by the various characters in the novel, including the narrator, when they speak or refer to other characters.

"Discourse Anaphora and the Functioning of Proper Names in Narrative." In Colin Martindale (ed.), *Psychological Approaches to*

the Study of Literary Narrative. Hamburg: Buske, 1988. 96-132. A detailed framework for an explanation of the ways names are chosen and function in stories. Includes a description and analysis of the diverging naming practices in 18 Hungarian and 14 American short stories.

"Spinning Names: Reference in Narrative." *Poetics* 17 (1988): 483-496. A taxonomy of how characters may be referred to in stories, with a discussion of some typical problems – e.g., the asymmetrical treatment of women and men.

"Toponyms, Prepositions, and Cognitive Maps." *Geolinguistics* 14 (1988): 54-76. A discussion of locative prepositions ("in," "on," etc.) in French and English placing the recent linguistic work of Annette Herskovits on English and of Claude Vandeloise on French within an older, sophisticated grammatical tradition, especially that of Scandinavian grammarians of French.

"Les appellatifs dans le discours: Madame, Mademoiselle, Monsieur avec et sans nom propre." *Le français moderne* 57 (1989): 54-78. The paper looks at the history of title use since the 17th century. It is shown that current descriptions of the use of titles with surnames and given names need rethinking in that they ignore abundant literary and non-literary data that go against standard views.

"Tutoiement, titre et identité sociale. Le système de l'adresse du Cid au Théâtre en liberté." *Poétique* 77 (1989): 53-75. Pronouns of address and titles are small but pervasive – socially and psychologically significant – measures of human relations; they function as a standard way of defining one's own or someone else's social identity. But despite the fact that terms of address are an obviously major component of dramatic writing, literary critics and theorists have neglected it. The paper also brings out the need to study modern uses of the Medieval and Classical rapid alternation between "tu" and "vous," an alternation which continues – unreported – into the Twentieth century.

"Reference and Preference in Narrative: Sherwood Anderson's Winesburg, Ohio." *Empirical Studies of the Arts* 7 (1989): 33-43. A study of the naming strategies students use when reading stories. This paper is a follow-up on the comparative piece on Hungarian and American short stories ("Discourse Ana-

phora,").

"Washington, Montana, the Dakotas – and Massachusetts: A Comparative Approach to Street Naming. *Names* 37 (1989): 115-138. [Co-author with Lawrence Baldwin] A pilot study for a series of papers on the social history of street naming. The projected end result is a cross-cultural book on street naming since Medieval times. The major focus of the book is the United States because the task of naming a continent made the U.S. (from 1692 on) the most systematic, inventive, and influential namer of streets in the last three centuries.

We have analyzed a database of several million current U.S. street names and have added to it 100,000 Nineteenth-century names and about 50,000 French street names. Other corpora are studied without the help of computing. Ongoing progress has been reported at conferences rather than in article form.

"The Street Naming Systems of the United States." *Proceedings of the XVIIth International Congress of Onomastic Sciences*. Helsinki: ICOS, 1990: 376-383. [Co-author with Lawrence Baldwin] A brief overview of the main U.S. naming systems.

"Nature et classification des sobriquets honorifiques." *Travaux de linguistique* 22 (1991): 21-40. A companion piece to the bicentennial, 1989, Français moderne study. The article describes and interprets the function of an "obvious" yet ignored extended use of titles of address in French. Passing reference is made to differences with extended usage in English.

"Les onomastiques" I. Champs, méthodes et perspectives. *Nouvelle revue d'onomastique* 15-16 (1990): 5-23. II. Etat des lieux. *Nouvelle revue d'onomastique* 17-18 (1991): 9-23. A two-part article for the first "new" volume of the official journal of the Société française d'onomastique. The journal was modifying its editorial outlook and my synthesis and proposed research program for expanding the scope of onomastic research was not entirely untimely. Part II contains over 150 bibliographic references covering the field of onomastics as defined in the body of the article.

"Onomastics and the Study of Literature." *Yearbook of Comparative and General Literature* 38 (1989): 16-35. This article is devoted to updating, and thus redefining, the literary study of

names in terms of contemporary poetics and discourse theory. It also places literary onomastics within the context of historical and social scientific research on naming (as previously described in "Les onomastiques").

"How New Naming Systems Emerge: The Prototypical Case of Columbus and Washington." *Names* 40 (1992): 153-166. [Co-author with Lawrence Baldwin] In this article, we hypothesize that a new, commemorative use of personal names as toponyms began and spread around the time of the French and American revolutions as a consequence of the personalities involved and of the events themselves. We also suggest that the American Revolution was instrumental in enabling the birth of three new anthroponymic naming systems.

Wellesley College