Phonetic Metaphor and the Limits of Sound Symbolism

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Evocative as it is elusive, the sound-symbolism of names tends to be a highly subjective affair, more the stuff of poetic fancy than objective critical analysis. Literary criticism, however, demands a rigorous and more objective approach, which is precisely what the ideas of Gérard Genette and Ivan Fónagy can provide. Where the former explores the limits of sound symbolism, the latter gives a cogent explanation for how, within those limits, this linguistic phenomenon actually works thanks to what he calls phonetic metaphor. In addition to elaborating a concrete framework in which to study the relations between sound and sense in literary onomastics, Fónagy's ideas open up new vistas for exploring the relationships between names, gender, affect and the body. Names in the fantasy novels of Ursula K. Le Guin illustrate the explanatory power of phonetic metaphor as a critical concept in onomastics.

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Even if they tend to lack a precise explanation why, most people have probably experienced the feeling that a given word or name sounds just right for the person, place, or thing that it designates. In the words of Otto Jespersen, a frequently cited champion of sound symbolism,

> The idea that there is a natural correspondence between sound and sense, and that words acquire their contents and value through a certain sound symbolism, has at all times been a favourite one with linguistic dilettanti, the best known examples being found in Plato's *Kratylos*. (1964: 396)

As Jespersen points out, the notion of a natural fitness between sound and sense is grounded in the western philosophical and poetic tradition, and provides the starting

point for the foundational work on onomastics, the *Cratylus*. In his celebrated dialogue, Plato claims that the ideal name is one that imitates its designee. The two most prevalent devices employed in this imitation are etymology and what Gérard Genette calls mimophony, or imitation by way of sound and form (1976: 17). Onomatopoeia are the most convincing examples of mimophony and their existence is rarely disputed, even if individual cases can prompt debate. Jespersen cites as examples the "*clink, clank, ting, tinkle* of various metallic sounds, *splash, bubble, sizz, sizzle* of sounds produced by water, *bow-wow, bleat, roar* of sounds produced by animals, and *snort, sneeze, snigger, smack, whisper, grunt, grumble* of sounds produced by human beings" (398). Such examples notwithstanding, words and names that imitate the sounds of the objects they designate are comparatively rare and it is with another class of linguistic phenomena, known variously as sound symbolism, tonal coloring, and phonosemantics, that the true controversy arises.

Genette documents how the many attempts throughout history to establish one-to-one correspondences between specific sounds and precise meanings have given rise to wildly conflicting perceptions. To give just one example, vowels have been frequently associated with colors and shades. The attributions given by different linguists, philosophers, and poets over the centuries include:

> A: light, white, red, blue, brown, shadow, dark, black
> E: clear, white, orange, yellow, green, blue, gray
> I: white, red, yellow, sky blue, black
> O: ivory, red, scarlet, yellow, blue, dark blue, brown, violet, black
> U: scarlet, violet, yellow, green, brown, gray, black (404)

Such contradictions do not prompt Genette to deny the existence of sound symbolism in language altogether, but he does claim it is limited in scope and often confused with or dependent upon other factors. To begin with, vocal sounds signify only in relationship with others, usually by way of direct oppositions between given sounds or classes of sound. Jespersen, for example, claims that high or front vowels signify light, as in *gleam, glimmer*, and *glitter*, while low or back vowels signify dark, as in *gloom* (1964: 400–401). Drawing upon scientific literature, Genette argues that isolated sounds cannot be linked to specific meanings; rather, it is in the paired opposition of sounds that a symbolism emerges (1976: 410–411). In addition to paired oppositions, the perception of meaning in sound is frequently due in part or in whole to what Genette calls "lexical contagion," a "common confusion" that undermines arguments concerning the frequency and importance of sound symbolism (417).[1]

Where Genette outlines the boundaries and limitations of sound symbolism, Ivan Fónagy explains how vocal sounds acquire sense within those defined limits by way of phonetic metaphors. In introducing the concept he writes,

> When one flips through the pages of a treatise on phonetics, willfully ignoring the contents so as to concentrate solely on the verbal expression, one is surprised by the wealth of tropes of all kinds. Each sound has it own color, vowels are light or dark. Consonants appear to be hard or soft, in some cases they are even felt to be liquid. The articulation of a vowel is strong or hard vs. gentle or soft. Certain constrictives are more sharp than others. The tone ascends or descends, etc. (1979: 1)

In short, when linguists describe /iː/ as a front, high, or clear vowel, and /uː/ as a back, low or dark one, they are using metaphors. George Lakoff and Mark Turner's

concept of "mapping" explains how these metaphors work. Simply put, elements from a source domain get transferred onto those of a target domain thanks to correspondences between the two (1989: 4). In the case of phonetic metaphors, the target domain would be sounds such as /iː/ or /uː/, while the source domain would be the visual shades light and dark or spatial orientations such as high and low or front and back. Correspondences would be the denotations and connotations of such terms as "light" and "dark," on the one hand, and specific aspects of vocal production, on the other.

This last observation points to the fact that phonetic metaphors, like metaphors in general, are grounded in the body. On this and several other points Fónagy's concept concurs with the theories of George Lakoff and Mark Johnson. Arguing that the human conceptual system "is fundamentally metaphorical in nature" (1980: 3), Lakoff and Johnson demonstrate how the basic metaphors that underlie thought are based upon spatial orientations relative to the human body and the actions of the body in its physical environment. These orientations typically map out oppositions such as UP vs. DOWN, NEAR vs. FAR, IN vs. OUT, and so on. These same arguments apply to phonetic metaphor, as Fónagy illustrates with his explanation for the particular qualities ascribed to front and back vowels:

> The tongue lifts and advances to the front of the palate to produce *clear* vowels, retracts and approaches the back of the palate as it articulates *dark* vowels. If one were to attribute a gestural function to these movements, it would have to be admitted that, in pronouncing the vowel *i* or *é* [/e/] the tongue orients itself towards the light; in articulating dark vowels, the tongue orients itself towards the back of the mouth—which is to say, toward the pharynx and the digestive tract so as to point, within the limits imposed by physiological conditions, to the body deprived of light, or the lowest depths [*bas-fonds*] of our corporal selves. (1979: 105–106)

Phonetic metaphors are thus founded in a coherent and systematic manner upon the topography of the vocal apparatus and the orientations or actions of the vocal organs. In terms of mapping, the spatial orientations of HIGH vs. LOW or FRONT vs. BACK get transferred onto vowels such as /iː/ or /uː/ by virtue of their point of articulation in the vocal apparatus. Movements of the vocal organs are likewise involved. Hence, the actions of opening or closing an aperture get mapped onto the opening or closing of the lips and glottis in producing open and closed vowels such as /i/ and /a/, while the flow or obstruction (e.g., friction) of substances through a conduit serve as the source domain for the flow or obstruction of air in producing liquid and fricative consonants such as /l/ and /f/.

In addition to articulating a link between sound and sense, phonetic metaphors convey affective values. They do so in part by way of the perceived qualities of the sounds, which attribute to phonemes an expressive capacity that can then be harnessed in poetic and everyday speech. Jespersen, for example, claims that the front vowels /iː/ and /ɪ/ represent sweetness or light and are associated with small or dainty things. That is why, he believes, these particular phonemes are found in a large number of sobriquets and diminutives (1964: 402). The back vowel /uː/, in contrast, is said to represent undesirable qualities, such as darkness and obscurity, and Fónagy notes that it is often associated with feelings of rejection and disgust (1991: 81–85).

This would then explain why this phoneme is prominent in infantile euphemisms, such as *boo-boo*, *pooh-pooh*, or *doo-doo*, which are "cute" words in English for unpleasant things. Phonetic metaphors can also convey emotions thanks to the mimetic capacities of the vocal apparatus, which imitates the actions of the body produced by or under the influence of emotions. Hence, the retraction of the tongue and the contraction of the pharynx in producing the /uː/ sound recalls what happens when one feels like vomiting, and this may help to explain why the sound is associated with feelings of rejection or disgust (1991: 84). These observations are once again concordant with those of Lakoff and Johnson: "Since there are systematic correlates between our emotions (like happiness) and our sensory-motor experiences (like erect posture), these form the basis of orientational metaphorical concepts (such as HAPPY IS UP)" (1980: 58).

Fónagy is quick to point out notable exceptions to such associations due to cultural and social factors. In Arabic, for example, back vowels are considered noble and even sacred (1979: 86). In French, the infantile words *doudou* (security blanket or teddy bear) and *chouchou* (darling, pet) hold positive rather than negative associations, and the same can be said of *Winnie the Pooh* in English. These cultural variations and other factors lead Fónagy to conclude that the perception of semantic and affective values associated with phonemes depends heavily upon context and suggestion. This means that the "latent tendencies" of individual sounds cannot be put into action with words in isolation, but must be brought out by the context or discourse in which the sounds and words appear (1979: 83). One frequent way of doing this is the use of paired oppositions, such as those Genette discusses. Fónagy takes the analysis a step further, however, by demonstrating that a phonetic pair often serves as an analogy for the territorialization of the body: a back vowel will represent the inside of the body when it is opposed to a front vowel that represents the outside. In other words, meaning is not generated in isolation, but in opposition: it is the positioning of front as opposed to back that establishes the spatial orientation and consequent contrast upon which metaphorical associations are built. This orientational metaphor can then be projected onto the outside environment, as in the famous example of Freud's *fort/da* scenario (discussed below).

The combined ideas of Genette and Fónagy provide a framework for discussing the sound symbolism of invented names in an objective, rigorous and concrete manner. The power and utility of this framework can be illustrated with several examples taken from the namecraft of Ursula K. Le Guin. Onomastics is central to much of this author's fiction, especially the Earthsea cycle of novels and stories, which is based upon the fantasy of magical names. Le Guin herself states that the sounds of the names in her fantasy are "more or less meaningful" to her. Yet, apart from noting that the names of three of the islands in her imaginary world are taken from her children's "baby-names," she offers no specifics (1979: 51). Critics are likewise at a loss to give satisfactory explanations. Eleanor Cameron, for example, writes that "the sound of these names fall upon my ear with ease and a sense of complete appropriateness, given the nature and atmosphere of Earthsea, but I cannot explain my satisfaction as, ideally perhaps, I should not be able to" (1971: 136). In yet another example, John Algeo argues that the meaning of the names in Le Guin's fantasies "is not cognitive sense at all, but incantational, mantric meaning. It has more in common

with sound symbolism or the phonestheme than with semantic features" (1982: 63). For this reason, he argues, "it would be worse than presumptuous to 'explain' the names in *A Wizard of Earthsea*. Names, like dreams, must explain themselves. And, in fact, there is no other 'explanation' for such magic names" (64). As their comments indicate, both Algeo and Cameron appear wary of explaining the sound symbolism of these names in a concrete manner, as if they feared that analysis would dispel or explain away the magic of Le Guin's craft. It can be argued to the contrary, however, that such explanations actually underscore the subtlety of her craft and enhance the sense of wonder evoked by her onomastic creations, as the following examples illustrate.

"Something of a dark name"

The first novel of Le Guin's fantasy cycle, *A Wizard of Earthsea*, follows a traditional quest narrative. The central hero is a wizard named Ged who sets out in search of a shadow creature, sailing the seas in his boat the Lookfar, and exploring many islands hitherto unknown to him. Upon hearing the name of Osskil for the first time he remarks, "That land has something of a dark name" (1968: 108). Taking this metaphorical qualification *à la lettre*, we find that the initial vowel /ɔ/ is often characterized as being dark or obscure, and as a back vowel it might be considered as vulgar, coarse, and impure (Fónagy, 1991: 81–84). The fricative /s/ is frequently cited as the vocalic imitation of whistling or the expression of scorn or menace (Masson, 1974: 857), associations which the narrator of Le Guin's novel explicitly refers to when he qualifies the dialect of the North Reach as "the sibilant Osskilian speech" (1968: 129). Values frequently attributed to /k/ are equally negative, such as ugliness, dissonance, obstruction, rigidity, and even ossification — this last one being particularly appropriate, for reasons that will soon become clear (Fónagy, 1991: 93–95). However, the toponym also contains an /ɪ/, the front vowel which possesses qualities that are opposed to those of the back vowel /ɔ/, just as the smooth, flowing characteristics of the liquid consonant /l/ are opposed to the fricative /s/ and the plosive /k/ (Fónagy, 1991: 75). So how is the reader to know whether the sonorities of *Osskil* are dark and dissonant, rather than light, clear, and euphonious? The answer is simple: it is the text that guides and reinforces the reader's impressions, influencing his or her perception of the name by qualifying it as "dark." This characterization illustrates a process that Lakoff and Johnson call metaphorical highlighting and hiding (1980: 10). By stating that *Osskil* is a dark-sounding name, Ged highlights the sounds and dark connotations of /ɔ/, /s/ and /k/, while backgrounding the sounds and positive connotations of /ɪ/ and /l/.

   These metaphorical perceptions of the name are systematically reinforced by other factors, notably the associations of *Osskil* in sound, form, and sense with other names and words in the text that hold negative connotations. The first syllable of the toponym recalls the name of the Mountains of Os, which like Osskil are found in the treacherous lands of the North. Numerous references to bones in relevant passages suggest that the name of the mountain range has been drawn from the French word for bone, *os*.[2] When Ged releases the shadow creature from the land of the dead, for example, the archmage Nemmerle saves him, but at the cost of his own life. As he

lies dying, the forehead and hair of the elder wizard, a native of Osskil, are described as "bleached by moonlight all to the color of bone" (69). Later, when Ged sees for the first time the fortress of Lord Benderesk, the wicked ruler of Osskil, it is described as "a tiny scratch against the sky, like a tooth, white" (112). This description is repeated several pages later when the central tower of the castle is compared to "a sharp tooth" rising up from the hill (119). The lord of the domain himself is evoked by the adjectives "bone-white, bone-thin" (120). The next pair of letters in *Osskil* forms the *sk* cluster, which possibly qualifies as a phonestheme (or phonaestheme), one of the sonorous effects that Algeo mentions.[3] This cluster is found in other names related to the North Reach, such as *Benderesk*, *Keksmet*, *Hosk*, and *Skiorh*. Cameron notes that the latter name, the only one in the novel she feels she can adequately explain, recalls words such as *scour*, *skewer*, and *core*. These are fitting lexical associations for the name of a man who "was hollowed out by the shadow-beast and possessed in order that it could lead Ged to a certain desolate place and turn upon him" (1971: 136). Similar observations could be made for *Benderesk*, which recalls *bender*, *risk*, and *berserk* or *berserker*, words that evoke images of violence and excess that are appropriate for the ruler who bears the name. In addition to these internominal associations, there is a concentration of other words in the passages related to Ged's sojourn in Osskil that possess the /sk/ cluster and hold sinister connotations: "*scowl*," "*scar*," "*scratch*," "*husk*," and "*dusk*" — this last one being repeated three times (111–115).

As this analysis demonstrates, the sound symbolism of *Osskil* is highly dependent upon other factors, including suggestion and what Genette calls "lexical contagion." Thanks to highlighting, the purportedly dark and dissonant sounds /ɔ/, /s/, and /k/ are foregrounded in the name, while the potentially light and euphonious ones are backgrounded. Moreover, the negative metaphorical qualities attributed to these highlighted sounds (obscure, coarse, impure, scornful, menacing, dissonant, obstructive, rigid, etc.) get mapped onto the name in which they appear. These sounds, particularly in the combinations /ɔs/ and /sk/, establish a network of internominal relationships and lexical associations between *Osskil* and other relevant names (*Os*, *Benderesk, Skiorh*, etc.) and words (*bone*, *scour*, *scowl*, *scratch*, *dusk*, etc.) that contain these same sounds. The negative connotations and semantic fields of these related words and names both fit with and reinforce the negative metaphorical qualities of the sounds in *Osskil*. In addition to Ged's suggestion that the land has a dark sound to it, these mutually reinforcing connections in sound and sense contribute to the perception that "dark" is indeed a fitting adjective to describe *Osskil*.

Maternal names

In Earthsea, people have at least two names, and sometimes three. For everyday purposes they are given a use-name that is known to all. The true name, in contrast, holds power over its designee, and for this reason is shared only with trusted friends and family members. The true name, moreover, can only be given by a qualified mage at a specified moment in the individual's life, usually sometime around puberty. In *A Wizard of Earthsea* it is Ogion, Ged's master and surrogate father, who gives the fledgling magician his true name:

> On the day the boy was thirteen years old, a day in the early splendor of autumn while still the bright leaves are on the trees, Ogion returned to the village from his rovings over Gont Mountain, and the ceremony of Passage was held. The witch took from the boy his name, Duny, the name his mother had given him as a baby. Nameless and naked he walked into the cold springs of the Ar where it rises among rocks under the high cliffs. As he entered the water clouds mingled over the water of the pool about him. He crossed to the far bank, shuddering with cold but walking slow and erect as he should through that icy, living water. As he came to the bank Ogion, waiting, reached out his hand and clasping the boy's arm whispered to him his true name: Ged. (15–16)[4]

In awaiting their naming ceremony, some people may also be given a third name, such as the maternal one the anonymous witch takes away.

In the opening pages of the novel, the young hero is given the name *Duny* by his mother, "and that and his life were all she could give him, for she died before he was a year old" (1). As this last phrase suggests, there is a strong connection between this juvenile name and two events, the birth of the child and the death of the mother, which involve the separation of the child from the body and/or presence of the life-giver. In a manner that brings to mind the famous *fort/da* scenario, in which Freud recounts how his grandson represents and consequently overcomes his mother's absence by way of a binary opposition, the construction of *Duny* represents and reenacts the events of separation and absence by way of its sound and form, at the same time that the name serves as a compensation for the child's loss.[5] As in the opposition between the /ɔ/ and /a/ of *fort* and *da*, the construction of *Duny* opposes two vowels, the rounded /uː/ and unrounded /iː/, although here the opposition is intensified since the two vowels are antipodes of one another, lying on exactly opposite ends of the tone scale in English. The posterior /uː/ represents the lowest tone, while the anterior /iː/ represents the highest. The name, moreover, has the air of an infantile or hypocoristic name, due in part to its final /iː/. As Jespersen notes, this terminal sound frequently appears in diminutives and nicknames: *kiddy*, *sweetie*, *Annie*, *Bobby*, and so on.

The symbolic representation of separation and absence in the name is made possible thanks to oppositions, not only between the vowels, but also the consonants. More precisely, there is a parallel movement from one phoneme that is similar, yet opposed to another:

$$/d/ \quad \rightarrow \quad /n/$$
$$/uː/ \quad \rightarrow \quad /iː/$$

The two vowels are both closed, but the first is back and the second front, signifying opposing spatial orientations such as BACK vs. FRONT, OUT vs. IN, and LOW vs. HIGH. The /d/ and /n/ are both voiced alveolar consonants, but the first is a plosive and the second a nasal. Both form an obstacle to the flow of air in the mouth at the place where the tongue presses against or toward the alveolar ridge. However, the /d/ contrasts with the /n/ since the latter permits air to escape through the nasal cavity; even if it is displaced or rerouted, air continues to circulate. The systematic values associated with these sounds provide the foundation upon which two categories of phonetic metaphors are constructed, a conduit metaphor for the consonants and a spatial metaphor for the vowels:[6]

	/d/		/n/
conduit:	OBSTRUCTED	→	FLOWING
	CLOSED	→	OPEN

	/uː/		/iː/
spatial:	BACK	→	FRONT
	IN	→	OUT
	LOW	→	HIGH

Thanks to these metaphors, the vocal production of *Duny* symbolically represents the passage of the infant from the dark depths of the maternal body up into the light, from low to high, from in to out, from back to front.

Jean-Jacques Lecercle warns that phonetic metaphors are easily taken to "ridiculous extremes" (1985: 146),[7] and at first sight it might appear this gloss of *Duny* is pushing at the limits. There are several factors, however, that support this reading of the name. First, in the magical universe of Earthsea it is said that "the name is the thing" (Le Guin, 1975: 83). Second, the association of the back vowel /uː/ with childbirth is not a new or original one. In discussing the traditional symbolisms associated with this sound from antiquity to the present, Fónagy quotes the following from the modern poet Ernst Jünger:

> In the sound *ou* there come together the mysteries of procreation and death; it remains both beyond and beneath the world of variety and colors [. . .] On the deathly side, there is the venerable, the solemn, the cult of ancestors, the night, demonic and spectral obscurity [. . .] The living side of things reveals the mysteries of the depths, that of natural laws yet to be formulated, the mystery of maternal fecundity. (1979: 106)

The originality of this reading of the phonetic metaphors in *Duny* is to place an emphasis, not on the static symbolism of a single sound, but upon the dynamic movement from one vowel to another, which reenacts the life-giving fruition of "maternal fecundity." Finally, two other names in the Earthsea cycle, *Tenar* and *Arha*, articulate the same metaphor in reverse, imitating not the act of birth and separation from the mother, but a return to the womb.

Tenar is the name given by her mother to the protagonist of the second novel in Le Guin's Earthsea books, *The Tombs of Atuan*. In the initial pages we learn that Tenar, the daughter of simple farmers, is identified by two priestesses of Atuan as the incarnation of the One Priestess of the Tombs. Afterwards, the girl is brought to the religious complex of Atuan and a ritual takes place in which the maternal name, *Tenar*, is "eaten" by the nameless shadows that haunt the underground caverns beneath the tombs. The girl then becomes *Arha*, the Eaten One (1970: 10). There is thus a certain parallel between the naming ceremony of Ged, who likewise loses his juvenile name; but where he receives his true name and by this very act becomes a man, Tenar becomes a being without a proper name, in the sense that *Arha* belongs to no one individual, but rather passes down through time from one incarnation of the One Priestess of the Tombs to another. After being taken away from her biological mother, Arha is symbolically swallowed back into the womb of the archetypal mother, and this event is represented in both names of the protagonist. First, the initial and intermediate consonants of *Tenar* are practically the same as those of

Duny, since the nasals are identical and the /t/ is an unvoiced allophone of /d/. The /r/ is articulated like /t/ and /d/ on the alveolar ridge, only slightly further back. The position of the tongue is thus more or less the same in the production of the consonants of the masculine and feminine names. This is not the case, however, with the vowels: those of *Duny* progress towards the front of the mouth, while the /ɪ/ (or /e/) and the /ɑː/ of *Tenar* regress towards the back, from high to low, from out to in. The vocal movement observed in *Tenar* is even more pronounced with *Arha*: while the /ɑː/ and the /ɒ/ are both posterior vowels, there is a descent from the middle of the tone scale to the bottom. The consonants descend as well, from the post alveolar ridge with /r/ toward the depths of the throat with /h/. The articulation of the name thus imitates swallowing, which is precisely what the name signifies: the eating of the maternal name and the return of the infant to the Great Mother's womb.[8]

   Fónagy discusses the regression and progression of the subject as it is represented in phonation. According to his theory, a social dimension is superimposed upon the physical one in the production of speech. This means that the acts of birth and swallowing that are phonetically imitated in *Arha, Tenar* and *Duny* are at once corporal and social, representing the child not only as a biological entity but also as a sociolinguistic being: the nascent subject or, as the French aptly put it, *l'avant-j*e. In the three names all the consonants except one are articulated on the alveolar ridge, and the insistence on this particularity of the vocal topography appears to signify a threshold that marks the passage from the interior of the body to the exterior, from self to other. In this case, the names *Duny* and *Tenar* fix precisely at this threshold, at the moment which precedes or inaugurates the birth of the linguistic subject in the process of psychological and social individualization. The displacement from /uː/ toward the /iː/ in *Duny*, from a posterior vowel to an anterior one symbolizes what Fónagy calls "a tendency of progressive socialization," a movement from organism to subject, from infant to adult (1991: 83). This progression becomes complete once, in the naming ceremony of Ged, the maternal name is taken away and replaced by the true name, thus effectuating his ascension into the patriarchal order of wizards as a privileged masculine subject (Robinson, 2008: 395). *Tenar* and in particular *Arha* symbolize the reverse: a psychological and social regression. The semi-vowel /r/ in the name of Arha allows a current of air to pass through, but the glottal fricative /h/ introduces an obstruction to articulate a phonetic metaphor of the arrested development of the female subject. According to Fónagy's argument, this kind of regression demonstrates an antisocial tendency (1991: 83). *Arha* is thus the very emblem of the sequestration of the heroine in the religious complex of Atuan, where only women and eunuchs are allowed to enter, and where the young priestess must spend the vast majority of her time alone or in the company of her elderly tutors, cut off from the rest of the world.

Conclusion

As the preceding glosses of *Osskil*, *Duny*, *Tenar*, and *Arha* illustrate, acknowledging the limits of sound symbolism does not lessen the aesthetic appeal of Le Guin's onomastic inventions. Rather, Genette's conclusions force us to go beyond vague impressions of the seeming fitness of names in sound to discover a hidden wealth of textual

indices, lexical associations, and internominal relationships. We have seen, for example, how two of the specific sound combinations in *Osskil*, /ɔs/ and /sk/, serve as the nodes around which a web of personal and place names are woven, and thus contribute to a tightly knit coherence in the construction of Le Guin's imaginary world. Then, the phonetic constructions of *Duny* and *Tenar* or *Arha* point to an occult relationship between the hero and heroine who bear the names. This relationship is amply hinted at in *The Tombs of Atuan* and will go on to serve as the basis for a fourth novel in the cycle, *Tehanu*. More emphatically than the narrative, however, the phonetic asymmetries in the masculine and feminine names underscore the asymmetry of gender with respect to magic in the Earthsea universe.

The concept of phonetic metaphor, meanwhile, helps us to understand better how sound and sense work together in creating the impression of a name's fitness. In *Osskil*, for example, qualities such as DARK or OBSTRUCTED are foregrounded, while opposed qualities such as LIGHT or FLOWING are backgrounded, when the eponymous hero of Le Guin's novel explicitly informs the reader on how to perceive the name. Then, there are no one-to-one correspondences between meanings and sounds. Rather, phonemes signify in relationship to one another by way of paired oppositions such as DARK vs. LIGHT or IN vs. OUT. These oppositions map qualities from one domain, notably that of visual shades or spatial orientations, onto the vocal production of sound. Such oppositions moreover carry connotations that allow for a transfer of affect onto the names in which the phonetic oppositions appear. Some of these affect-laden connotations are well known and exploited in an obvious manner in Le Guin's text, such as the moral and emotional values associated with darkness as opposed to light. If less obvious, oppositions based on spatial orientations are likewise connoted. In *Duny* the opposition between IN and OUT establishes a movement from posterior to anterior vowels, while *Tenar* and *Arha* do just the opposite, to symbolize birth as opposed to swallowing or social and psychological progression as opposed to regression and sequestration. All of these examples demonstrate how a concrete analysis of sound symbolism based on Fónagy's concept of phonetic metaphor can only increase our admiration for Le Guin's invented names, without destroying any of their remarkable magic.

Notes

[1] All translations are my own.

[2] Le Guin majored in French as a graduate student and later taught French at the university level. That she drew upon the language in her onomastic inventions is made clear in a letter she addressed to James W. Bittner concerning the name *Davenant*. This, the name given by terrians to the world of Hain, the cradle of the *League of All Worlds* in her Hainish cycle of science fiction novels, was created from the French words *d'avènement* and *d'avenir* to signify "from the beginning" and "of the future" (Bittner, 1984: 96).

[3] Routledge's *Linguistics Encyclopedia* defines phonaesthemes as "[P]honetic-semantic resemblances between recurrent parts of words which occur in very limited sets and yet do not seem to have any

meaning at all beyond the limited set, for example: /ð/ in *this*, *that*, *then*, *there*; /n/ in *not*, *neither*, *no*, *never*; /fl/ in *flash*, *flicker*, *flame*, *flare*; /sn/ in *sniff*, *snort*, *snore*, *snot*" (1991: 315).

[4] For a detailed discussion of this passage and Ged's "paternal" name, see Robinson, 2008: 393–403.

[5] In "Beyond the Pleasure Principle" Freud recounts how his grandson represents and consequently overcomes his mother's absence by way of a binary opposition between the /ɔ/ and /ɑ/ of the German words *fort* (gone) and *da* (there) (1955: 14–15). It is interesting to note that what the child actually articulates is "o-o-o-o" and "*da*," thereby privileging the vowels over the consonants of the words and intensifying the opposition between the two vowel sounds.

6 See Lakoff and Johnson for more on conduit meta-
   phors (1980: 10–13) and orientational metaphors
   (14–21, 25–32).
7 Lecercle specifically criticizes Julia Kristeva's claim
   that open posterior vowels represent the anal drive.
8 The phonetic metaphor in the two names of the
   heroine must be read within the framework of the
   archetypal Great Mother. Because of the obvious
   homophony between *tomb* and *womb*, the reader

identifies the underground passages of the religious
complex of Atuan with the female reproductive
anatomy. The image of an underground cavern
or tunnel representing the Great Mother archetype
reappears in three of the more recently published
texts in the Earthsea cycle: the short stories "The
Finder" and "The Bones of the Earth" in *Tales from
Earthsea*, and also the latest novel, *The Other
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