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"The Course of a Particular": Names and Narrative in the Works of Joseph Mitchell

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Joseph Mitchell (1908–1996) wrote about unusual New York people for *The New Yorker*. For journalists like Mitchell, a name identifies a "who," an essential component of a news story even more central to a profile. For Mitchell, however, names are strangely significant: they are textual *loci* at which narratology, epistemology, and ontology enmesh. The balance of these categories and their mutual engagements are idiosyncratic and define Mitchell's style. It is a style that proves how intellectually and emotionally powerful journalistic uses of names can be. A catalog of names confirms one's knowledge of phenomena by reconstituting it narratively. Naming in narrative is a mode of knowing one's experience. But maybe the stakes are higher: maybe names insist on the reality of the things named. Onomastic specificity underwrites our ontological confidence, but the ontological significance of names is never wholly persuasive, not even when justified within a narrative. Confronting its limitations, as Mitchell did, brings on melancholy. Joy and melancholy wrought of names are intimately related in Mitchell's style and integral to it, as, after all, they are to living.

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Joseph Mitchell (1908–1996), well known as an acute observer of New York life, especially unusual New York people, wrote for *The New Yorker* from 1938 until, in 1964, he more or less stopped writing — or at least stopped publishing what he wrote — though he was on the staff of the magazine until 1996. His writer's block is unfortunately as infamous as his *New Yorker* stories, collected in the omnibus *Up in the Old Hotel* (1992), are worth reading.[1] Noel Perrin, another great American essayist, quotes Malcolm Cowley — poet, critic, essayist, and editor — as saying, "'In his own somewhat narrow field [. . .] he is the best reporter in the country'" (1983: 168), and Perrin explains this and any similar pronouncement: "What is remarkable about

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Mitchell, or one of the things, is that he has taken that form of writing which has the very lowest claim to being art, and made an art of it. Some would say a high art" (1983: 167). Mitchell was very much a writer's writer.[2]

For journalists like Mitchell, a name identifies a "who" or sometimes a "where," essential components of a news story even more central to the sort of profile for which Mitchell is renowned. For Mitchell, however, names are strangely significant: they are textual *loci* at which narratology, epistemology, and ontology enmesh. The balance of these categories and their mutual engagements are idiosyncratic and define Mitchell's style. It is a style that proves how intellectually and emotionally powerful journalistic uses of names can be.

Names fascinated Mitchell and often took notable roles in his stories. For instance, in "King of the Gypsies" (1942),[3] Mitchell noted that in New York's Romani community at that time, "Each person has two first names, a travelling or *gajo* name, and a home or gypsy name. Johnny's [the 'Gypsy' king's] home name is Lazillia. Wives use their husbands' first names; Dovie, say, becomes Dovie Steve, Annie becomes Annie Mike" (1993: 149). So, in a later piece, "The Gypsy Women" (1955), Mitchell wrote, "a detective I used to know quite well named Daniel J. Campion," who had been "the commanding officer of the Pickpocket and Confidence Squad" and became "the Department's [that is, the New York Police Department's] expert on gypsies," took "Notes in re individual techniques of Bronka, Saveta, Matrona, Lizaveta, Zorka, Looba, Kaisha, Linka, Dunya — all home or gypsy names — and certain other *bajour* women in the gypsy bands that frequent New York City," as well as "Notes in re various different spellings of gypsy given names and family names as shown on the tombstones of gypsies in two cemeteries in New Jersey" (1992: 165). Campion kept lots of notes on New York's Romani, and "he made these notes on yellow legal scratch-paper, and kept them in some file folders, on the flaps of which he had pasted detailed labels" (1992: 165), but two of the three labels that caught Mitchell's eye, two of the three he reported, were about names.

Through Mitchell, Campion explained that what we think of as bands — subgroups within a tribe — are called *vitsas* in Romani. "A few *vitsas* have descriptive names," he noted, "such as the Saporeschti, or the Snakes; the Cuneschti, or the Knifers; and the Foosoo Yarri, or the Bean Eaters. But the majority are named after highly respected old gypsies in the past" (1992: 187). Campion continued,

> I'm not at all sure how many *vitsas* there are in the United States, and I'll confine my remarks to the ones I'm closely acquainted with [...] I'll give you the names of these *vitsas*, and the names of their principal families. Seven are Russian vitsas — the Frinkuleschti, the Mineschti, the Mitteleschti, the Gooneschti, the Goneschti, the Chookooriah, and the Lydakurschti, and the names of the principal families in them are Thompson, Demetro, Ranko, Ufie, Siganoff, Vladochakowski, Vlado, Costello, Mikhailovich, Mitchell, Magill, Mittilo, Merchon, Marko, Martino, Nicholas, Stokes, Guy, Petro, and Bimbo. (1992: 190)

Campion proceeds to list the names of the six Kalderash *vitsas* and their families, the three Serbian *vitsas* and their families, the three Mexican *vitsas*, and so on, in a passage too lengthy to quote here.

That length, however, is an intriguing feature of Mitchell's style, for he is unusually willing to interpolate an extended commentary on New York City Romani names and naming practices into a general journalistic introduction to Romani culture. Such narrative distension is significant — why invite readers' distraction by dwelling on the subject of names out of proportion to other elements of culture (marriage, religion, child-rearing, diet, ritual, and festivity, etc.)? Only fortune-telling and the fortune-telling con called *bajour* — the subject of notes in the third file folder Mitchell mentions — receive more attention, as one might after all expect in an extended report of a detective's account of the City's Romani. In proportion, names mattered more to Mitchell than did some other cultural material.

Beyond the length of the passage, one must account for Mitchell's tendency to itemize at an unusually specific level. In semantic terms, nothing gets more specific than names. Mitchell's pleasure in catalogues, names, and catalogues of names is legendary; it was rhetorical, yes, but not just a matter of his writing, so perhaps something more than rhetorical. He certainly approved of rampant naming in the styles of other writers. A younger *New Yorker* colleague, Mindy Aloff (1993: 17/a–b), reviewing *Up in the Old Hotel*, recounted her first meeting with Mitchell:

> What [*New Yorker*] columnists did I like to read? he asked. It was just a light question, yet he sounded genuinely curious [. . .] and I blurted out that my favorite columnist of all was Audax Minor, who covered horse racing. [. . .] Was I a racing fan? the man asked. I explained that I knew about as much about horse racing as I knew about the Secretariat of the U.N. — which is to say, virtually nothing — but that I enjoyed the dash of the writing, the writer's omnivorous appetite for the smallest detail of his field, his amazing ability to pack a wealth of fact and story-telling into one or two columns of type, and, most of all, his Homeric penchant for cataloguing the names of horses. My interlocutor's face brightened. He also relished the names of horses, and he began to reel off a few.

Even though she is describing the style of George T. Ryall, who used the pseudonym Audax Minor for writing "The Racing Track" from 1926 to 1978, Aloff is also describing Mitchell's style, as Mitchell proves when, helplessly, he reels off that list.[4]

But who is supposed to be the reader of a passage like that concerning the *vitsas*? How many readers care to know such onomastic facts? What is at stake for the author in presenting them? Mitchell was recognized as a great writer when the "Gypsy" articles were published and remains so; we must conclude that such passages and their overly itemized character appeal to readers, or at least do not keep them from reading Mitchell's work and admiring it. The author's stakes are more difficult to assess: such passages might reflect a narrative strategy in which lists of names do ontological and epistemological work; or they might reflect something more existential about the author's grasp of or grasping at what there is to know and on what terms, how we know what there is to know, and how narrative enacts that knowledge.

In stories written during his tenure at the *New Yorker*, Mitchell sees narrative potential in names as few authors do. Names often foreground a story's orientation. For example, "Professor Sea Gull" (1942) begins, "Joe Gould is a blithe and emaciated little man who has been a notable in the cafeterias, diners, barrooms, and dumps of Greenwich Village for a quarter of a century" (1992: 52). That approach to the

subject, while obvious, is not necessary. Its self-consciousness is clearer when taken with the story's title: *Professor Sea Gull* is one of Gould's nicknames, as we learn from a list of them later in the story. Similarly, another piece begins, "Jane Barnell occasionally considers herself an outcast and feels that there is something vaguely shameful about the way she makes her living" (1992: 89), which is as a so-called "bearded lady," and the story is titled with her nickname, "Lady Olga" (1940). The combination of nickname — the socially connotative name placed first, without explanation — and the character's given name — denotation placed second, without any intervening text — plays with problems of naming and identity, names as a way of structuring and thereby knowing about the world, names as meaningful ontological markers, that is, reliable indications of "things" worth our attention. In each case, the rest of the story unravels these implications of Mitchell's original narrative act, which is also an onomastic one.

None of this denies Mitchell's pleasure in unexpectedly gaudy or provocative names. In "The Same as Monkey Glands" (1939), Mitchell remembered once stopping in Savannah, Georgia, where he took a streetcar to the Isle of Hope, "a small lush island" home "to Mr Will Barker's diamondback-terrapin farm" (1992: 314). "The Isle of Hope line," Mitchell noted "is a single-track interurban railroad; in its steam engine days it bore the stirring title Savannah, Thunderbolt & Isle of Hope Railroad. I recommend a trip on it to lovers of Americana" (1992: 315), but, of course, he is recommending the name as Americana, too, well aware, as many readers would be, that the name is as close as they would ever get to that ride. Believing in what we cannot see for ourselves may require a name, perhaps not always an outlandish or even an evocative one, though the story-orienting nicknames are both. The *vitsa* names are interesting in part because they capture the transformation of the culturally evocative to the utterly mundane.

And Mitchell often lists mundane names. He pauses the narrative to indulge the names for what they are worth. Such lists are rarely as extensive as that of the *vitsa* and Romani band names, but they often test readerly patience a bit, especially to the extent that the names are referentially meaningless to readers. In the case of Joe Gould, we know the referent: "Bartenders and countermen in the Village," we are told, "refer to him as the Professor, the Sea Gull, Professor Sea Gull, the Mongoose, Professor Mongoose, or the Bellevue Boy" (1992: 53). But in other cases, we cannot imagine that many readers know or have ever known all the items named in one or another of Mitchell's lists. In a story titled "Mazie" (1940) — which title is followed by the opening sentence, "A bossy, yellow-haired blonde named Mazie P. Gordon is a celebrity on the Bowery" (1992: 23), the pattern by now a familiar focusing technique — the eponymous heroine is free with her dimes, supporting her favorite Bowery boys. One is

> a courtly old Irishman named Pop [. . .] Mazie thinks he has a beautiful baritone, and every morning, in return for her dime, he favors her with two or three ballads. Her favorites — she hums them — are "Whiskey, You're the Divil," "The Garden Where the Praties Grow," "Tiddly-Aye-Aye- for the One-Eyed Reilly," and "The Widow McGinnis's Pig." (1992: 32–33)

Mazie's other dependent is

> an addled, sardonic little man who says he is a poet and whom Mazie calls Eddie Guest [. . .] At the Venice one night he saw "The River," the moving picture in which the names of the tributaries of the Mississippi were made into a poem. When he came out, he stopped at Mazie's cage, spread his arms, and recited the names of many of the walk-up hotels on the Bowery. "The Alabama Hotel, the Comet, and the Uncle Sam House," he said, in a declamatory voice, "the Dandy, the Defender, the Niagara, the owl, the Victoria House and the Grand Windsor Hotel, the Houston, the Mascot, the Palace, the Progress, the Palma House and the White House Hotel, the Newport, the Crystal, the Lion and the Marathon." (1992: 32–33)

Neither Pop nor Eddie Gould nor their proclivity for names is unique in Mitchell's work.

For example, in "A Spism and a Spasm" (1943), "A garrulous old southerner, the Reverend Mr James Jefferson Davis Hall, is the greatest and most frightening street preacher in the city" (1992: 71). "Holding his banner aloft," — the banner reads "Put down that glass and go. The saloon is the gate to hell. Dreadful are the mornings of a drunkard. Prepare to meet thy God" —

> Hall proceeded up the avenue. In an hour and a half, after making stops at O'Donnell's, Kieran & Dineen's, Larry's, the Eagle Bar, Gilhuly's, Pete Moran's, the Ranch Bar, Morahan's, McGreevy's, Mickey Walker's, and the Ringside, he reached Fiftieth Street, which was about as far uptown as he over goes. (1992: 75)[5]

The Reverend Hall, the list proves, was as capable of a bar crawl as any New York drunkard, except that he wasn't crawling and, the next morning, could recall where he had been — his march is the antithesis of the crawl.

Mitchell's impulse to list names, so amply satisfied in his writing for *The New Yorker*, was less developed — or at least less evident — during Mitchell's earlier career in newspapers. Newspapers need short articles written on a deadline. Perhaps Mitchell, in a rush to file stories, had no time to compile lists of names; perhaps he did, but editors removed them to save space; perhaps Mitchell edited himself, knowing that editors were bound to do so, if he did not. *My Ears Are Bent* (2001), a collection of articles Mitchell wrote for *The World-Telegram* and *The Herald Tribune* in the 1930s, first published in 1938, well illustrates what we might call Mitchell's pre-onomastic style, already briskly efficient.

In this earlier style, Mitchell often suggests that he could list names to illustrate a point of character, but instead lets a single item stand for that implied compilation. In the title essay of *My Ears Are Bent*, for instance, Mitchell writes, "One of our reporters, Sutherland Denlinger, used to sing spirituals and military songs while working. He got so he could sing 'Tiddly Winks God Damn' and write an analysis of the previous day's testimony at the same time" (2001: 23). Does anyone, given the examples above, doubt that, given the chance, Mitchell would have listed several of the songs with which Denlinger serenaded his fellow news hounds? In "Drunks," Mitchell explains that his "customers hardly ever call" Dick of Dick's Bar and Grill

> by his name. He is called "The House." For example, a customer will say to a bartender, "Go see if The House will cash a check for me." When he is shaking dice, he always sings. He believes he has a good voice, and his favorite song is "Love in Bloom." (2001: 27)

Mitchell's interest in names is occasionally obvious, even in these early stories — instinctive, but run on a tight leash.[6]

Interest in names is not the same as self-aware stylistic and narratological use of names, and, in his early journalism, Mitchell seems not yet to have committed himself to their intrinsic reportorial value: in a piece titled "Voodoo in New York, N.Y.," Mitchell wrote,

> The conjure man buys his supplies, including his snakes and pretty little baby bats, from a supply house in Manhattan, a mail-order house in an office building on a street in the West Seventies. I talked for hours with the man who operates this establishment, but I had to promise not to use the name of the firm or the address before the man would open up. The name and address would not add anything to the story anyway. (Mitchell, 2001: 146–147)

A decade later, Mitchell would have disagreed on this point with his earlier self.

Once Mitchell was in the catbird seat — his office at 25 West 43rd Street, erstwhile home to *The New Yorker* — he could let his interest in names and naming play out in a newly relaxed style, still taut in many respects, but replete with information. Whether the information is essential or surplus, desirable or disruptive is in the eyes of beholders — author, editors, and readers — but names are prominent in the flow of fact and narrative association. Mitchell's new style is easily attributable to the new setting. As Renata Adler (1999: 24) points out,

> A common pattern for writers was to come to the magazine after working for years at newspapers, and to be relieved not to have to write for deadlines every day any more, or every few days, or even every few weeks. There was time and space to work on a piece and get it right. The work would get longer, and the pieces fewer, until there were none, or almost none.

Eventually, Mitchell reached "almost none," but between 1938, when he arrived at *The New Yorker*, and the publication of "Joe Gould's Secret" (1964), he cultivated an increasingly complex style, both psychologically and sociologically insightful, inflected with notes of epistemology and ontology, and dependent on names. He may not have decided on such a style, nor planned its onomastic element. Over the years, however, he must have recognized how his style had changed from that of his newspaper days and deliberately perfected it.

In any event, interest in names and listing of names became signatures of Mitchell's style during his *New Yorker* years. Some war-weary *New Yorkers* who read "A Spism and a Spasm" in 1943 may have been well versed in the watering holes from the Village to Fiftieth. *The New Yorker*'s original editor, Harold Ross, was quick to insist that his magazine was not meant for teetotal ladies in Dubuque, but there were plenty of New Yorkers who did not recognize these low-end landmarks, either, for any number of geographical and social reasons. And, true, there may have been some fans of popular music who knew all of the songs Pop sang to Mazie. For those few the lists would be especially evocative. What could be accomplished, however, by dwelling on names that meant nothing to most readers? The easiest response is that detail adds local color, and it is very likely true that it does, and very likely, too, that limning the New York scene was among Mitchell's writerly motives. Naming is a

means of celebrating the variety of phenomena, of announcing it without assuming that every name means something to every reader.

Apparently superfluous lists of names also intrude the author's ironic superiority into the narrative, sometimes gently, sometimes flamboyantly — only the author, the journalist who has investigated, knows all names for all things. Although potentially aggressive, this stance is muted in Mitchell's work, because the names often come, not directly from the narrator but from his interlocutors. Nevertheless, assuming Mitchell did not print absolutely everything those interlocutors said to him, he had to select from what they said as he built his story, and it says something about Mitchell's style and sense of narrative structure that he so often chose to include as many names as the reader and the narrative could bear.[7] Naming to that extent constitutes an essential part of Mitchell's authorial brand.

But it is a problematic brand, because it involves considerable narratological risks. Arguably, the maxims laid out by Paul Grice in "Logic and Conversation" apply in written work, too, especially the sort of conversational journalism — a species of storytelling — for which Mitchell is principally known. For Grice, participants in a conversation observe a Cooperative Principle: "Make your conversational contribution such as is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged" (Grice, 1989: 26). Various maxims support the fundamental principle, for instance, "Be relevant," "Be brief," and "Be orderly," any or all of which might be infringed by Mitchell's habitual intrusion of names — especially lists of names — into narrative.

Of course, "cooperation" is a complex notion, the terms of which change considerably from mode to mode or medium to medium. In Grice's "talk exchanges [. . .] the participants have some common aim" (Grice, 1989: 29). Readers and writers, too, have common aims, perhaps more easily identified in reading an essay than in reading fiction or poetry, and, though perhaps not continuously, their contributions are "dovetailed, mutually dependent" (Grice, 1989: 29) at various junctures in the exchange, if reading an essay constitutes an exchange. Within this framework, readers might be charitable about matters of brevity and order and, when the author exceeds expectations, enjoy the breach and think through it to some benefit. Relevance is difficult to gauge, especially for an observer of rather than party to an exchange — readers may grasp, project, or construct relevance of names and lists of names in the act of reading one of Mitchell's essays, perhaps partly from sympathy with the author's apparent sincerity in proposing them as relevant.

The pragmatics of cooperation and its maxims partly underlies subtler narratologies. So, David Herman (2002: 91) argues that the status of a narrative — in his terms, its "narrativehood" — "is a function of the way linguistic, textual, or more broadly semiotic features cue recipients to activate certain kinds of world knowledge in certain contexts." Further, "Narrativity [. . .] is a scalar predicate: a story can be more or less prototypically story-like" (2002: 91). Mitchell's lists of names may count as "script-activating cues" for readers, prompting them to blend world knowledge into their understanding of one or another of his stories, either the knowledge of what is named, or knowledge of the name without knowledge of the thing designated thereby, or knowledge of how names signify.

But construction of a narrative entails risk, as Herman points out, because "Both too many and too few script activating cues diminish narrativity" (2002: 91). Thus, to ensure narrative success, a writer like Mitchell might curb the inclination always to include more names. The point of grounding Mitchell's style in pragmatics and narrative theory is not to overcomplicate the matter, but simply to demonstrate that narrative risk for one given to interruption of a narrative sequence is unavoidable. Thus, Mitchell must have decided that the role of naming in his specific narratives justifies the risk, that it is preferable to other narrative approaches or even necessary to his narrative performance.

But there is perhaps something more metaphysically problematic about Mitchell's naming. A catalogue of names confirms one's knowledge of phenomena — people and places, especially, and social relationships reflected in nicknaming — by reconstituting it narratively. Naming in narrative is a mode of knowing one's experience. Maybe the stakes are higher still: maybe naming makes things real; maybe names insist on the ontological status of the things named. This is why the status of names is such a logical problem, and why Bertrand Russell and some other philosophers have lain awake nights thinking about the ontological claims made in fictional statements — to what do the names of fictional characters refer?

But then again maybe not — perhaps knowing the names of things does not certify that what is named is really there. Names for imaginary objects prompted Russell to develop his Theory of Descriptions, in which if what looks like a name is really a description, then it is not really a name. Challenging Frege, he insisted that "such words as *John* merely indicate without meaning" (Russell, 1903: 502). Obsessive naming, naming for the sake of naming in reportorial stories like Mitchell's, suggests a deep anxiety about reality and one's grasp on it. Names and repeating names narratively are palliatives for that anxiety, but are they in fact the remedies they purport to be? Russell's logic is an arid landscape for the writer whose meaningful associations with the world around him depend on names and the capacity to know by naming.[8] Yet the problem of mere indication, of names that mean nothing to readers, plagues Mitchell's work.

Mitchell is aware of the problem names pose to him. At times, he pays dialogic attention to knowing a name or even the right name. In "Hit on the Head with a Cow" (1938), he introduces Charles Eugene Cassell, who calls himself Captain Charley (1992: 40):

> The Captain becomes evasive and hostile when any one tries to pin him down. Once I asked him the name of the ship of which he was captain.
> "It was in 1917," he said. "War time."
> "What was the name of the ship?"
> "Like I said, this was war time. They called it the World War; to me it was just a fuss, a commotion."
> "What was the name of the ship?"
> "Number Four."
> "What kind of a ship was Number Four."
> "God damn it, sir, don't interrupt me. Haven't you got any respect for old age?"
> "What kind of a ship was Number 4?" (1992: 48)

There is an unselfconscious evasion here on Mitchell's part: Captain Charley does not like to be pinned down, we are told, but pinning reality down is exactly what Mitchell accomplishes in the dialogue — until Captain Charley names the ship in question, we cannot take the ship as real or assertions about the ship as true. Specificity on the scale of names underwrites our ontological confidence, and the vexed relationships among names, narrative, knowledge, and reality constitute the depth and pleasures of Mitchell's work.

Recently, *The New Yorker* published a fragment of a memoir Mitchell was writing during his supposedly blocked decades. Mitchell recalls, "In my time, I have visited and poked around in every one of the hundreds of neighborhoods of which this city is made up, and by the city, I mean the whole city — Manhattan, Brooklyn, the Bronx, Queens, and Richmond" (2013: 62/a), and though we know what he means by the whole city, he has to name its parts. He has "been up in dozens of skyscrapers while they were under construction" and "down in three tunnels while they were under construction — the Queens Midtown Tunnel, the Lincoln Tunnel, and the Brooklyn Battery Tunnel" (2013: 69/a). He reflects for a while on a familiar building that becomes Holy Trinity Cathedral of the Ukrainian Autocephalic Orthodox Church in Exile (2013: 65/c) — that is its name. Such names mark New York's topography, but they also mark the topography of Mitchell's experience. He walks in relation to the things he names: they are real to him because he names them, but he is real — or knows he is real — because he is present among things with names.

So, Mitchell's narrative naming strategies are of existential importance. Reading his stories, one easily misses this, absorbed by their irresistible specificity. But in the memoir, Mitchell acknowledges it:

> I used to feel very much at home in New York City. I wasn't born here, I wasn't a native, but I might as well have been: I belonged here. Several years ago, however, I began to be oppressed by a feeling that New York City had gone past me and that I didn't belong here anymore [. . .] Ever since I came to New York City, I have been going back to North Carolina for a visit once or twice a year, and now I began going back more often and staying longer [. . .] and then I began to be oppressed by a feeling that things had gone past me in North Carolina also, and that I didn't belong down there anymore, either. I began to feel painfully out of place wherever I was [. . .] Then, one Saturday afternoon, while I was walking around the ruins of Washington Market, something happened that led me, step by step, out of my depression. A change took place in me. And that is what I want to tell about. (2013: 69/b–c)

We do not find out what the change was; that is where the fragmentary memoir stops. But we see in the anecdote the loss of orientation and then reorientation by relationship with a named thing. The problem with writer's block, for Mitchell, was that he had no naming narrative to orient him, to make places real, or to make him really a constituent of those places. In losing the power to name, he lost a sense of self secure in a named surrounding.[9] But the ontological power of names is never wholly persuasive; confronting its limitations, as Mitchell did, brings on melancholy.

The title of this article begins with the title of a poem by Wallace Stevens, a melancholy one. In that poem, "the leaves cry" from their branches, as a winter wind

moves them. Keeping a distance, one "merely hears the cry," and the struggle to find meaning in that cry is like that of Mitchell attempting to find meaning by naming his experience, for "though one says that one is part of everything, / There is a conflict, there is a resistance involved; / And being part is an exertion that declines." These leaves may cry, but they are much like names in Russell's theory, which indicate without meaning anything beyond what they designate: they are "leaves that do not transcend themselves," and they are articulate "without meaning more / Than they are in the final finding of the ear." For readers who do not know exactly what Mitchell's names designate, then, the quality of those names is not so much cultural or narratological, as unexpectedly — perhaps paradoxically — both logical and lyrical. For Mitchell, however, they can prompt both ontological anxiety and epistemological security, which describes a problem rather than solves it.

I would be more suspicious of this associative reading had I not discovered Elizabeth Macklin's poem, "To Author Re: Insert," which is followed by the parenthetical, "After Joseph Mitchell, 1908–1996" (Macklin, 1997). What is the insert in question? What might have supplied Mitchell's writer's block, I suppose, yet I think of the lists of names that permeate his *New Yorker* style as inserts in narrative structure. Macklin's poem is melancholy, too. It describes the conflict inherent in doing "it" in "a good way," for instance, "not especially harsh/or pressed, strait or distressed." Macklin warns us "Not to make a cartoon of the deity," who might be Mitchell, "mired/in deeper dilemmas" and "the stunned dumb opposite of glorified," whereas Stevens' leaves' cry is not one of "divine attention." The writer — Mitchell — resists "plain, plain white/like a nothing." As we all know, as the poem concludes, "the newspapermen used to say: *Why/who what where when*," questions in the first instance perhaps not finally satisfied by names. What the newspaper man wants is "*More*" — more answers, more meaning, more names, at least, in Mitchell's case.

Joy and melancholy are intimately related in Mitchell's style and integral to it, as, after all, they are to living. They resist each other in the triumph of knowing what is named and the doubt that naming constitutes existence. Rundus (2005: 71) reports, "Mr Mitchell told me in 1995 that he was negotiating a contract with Pantheon for his autobiography, apparently with the working title 'A Man Named Me.'"[10] One year before his death, Mitchell still hoped to lean his existence and identity up against a name, much as he leans against the front of Sloppy Louie's, a restaurant he wrote about in "Up in the Old Hotel" (1952), in a photograph accompanying the autobiographical fragment (Mitchell, 2013: 62/c–63). Apparently, the name was less secure, or perhaps less comfortable, than he had hoped, so he propped his identity up with a cryptic act of personal deixis, instead.

Notes

[1] Mitchell's supposed writer's block is the stuff of legend and much explained. Renata Adler, another *New Yorker* writer, attributes it to the editorial regime of William Shawn: "The magazine's ambivalence in precisely the matter of publication was remarkable. There began to be feeling that it was vulgar, perhaps morally wrong to write" (1999: 23). Rundus (2005: 79–83) runs through a number of possible explanations, and Sims (2007: 178–184), following Stanley Hyman, extends one of them, involving Joe Gould, the subject of two of Mitchell's books. Rundus (2005: 80) resists the claim that

Mitchell stopped writing completely as overblown, and he was apparently writing his autobiography, or attempting to write it, towards the end of his life (Rundus, 2005: 71; see also Mitchell, 2013). Though I am not concerned here with Mitchell's writer's block per se, I do argue that Mitchell's relationship to names and naming participated in the malaise that was both symptom and cause of that block.

2 An account of Mitchell's status among writers would strain the compass of this article, but since Mitchell's narrative uses of names and naming are significant in part because of his reputation, that status must not be overlooked. Rundus (2005: 63–64) helpfully digests the epithetical views of a wide range of notable writers and critics, most of their names familiar to most readers of this article: "He was the angel of the odd or the imp of the perverse, the paragon of reporters, a national treasure, a buried treasure; he was the Manhattan Meistersinger [. . .] he was the best reporter in the country, the *New Yorker*'s finest reporter, the finest writer on the *New Yorker*, the *New Yorker* writer who set the standard [. . .] a formidable prose stylist and a master rhetorician, a reporter for all climes and seasons, an immortal [. . .] a measuring stick of journalistic integrity, the poet of the waterfront, our poet laureate of entropy, a very careful writer, an essential writer . . .the greatest master of the English declarative sentence, the great artist-reporter of our century, the best writer in America."

3 *Gypsy* and related forms used to designate the Romani people are clearly pejorative and should be avoided, but the cultural awakening that leads to that judgment had not yet occurred when Mitchell was writing the articles in question, and so he uses what was in the 1940s and 1950s the stylebook approved term. This was true, not only of Gypsy, but of the further diminishing, uncapitalized *gypsy*, which follows a pattern of typographical pejoration explained by Allen (1988). Though *Roma* is sometimes used now to designate the people in question, it also — according to some — has pejorative connotations, and so the preferred form is *Romani*, for both language and people, both noun and adjective.

4 Sims (2008: 102–103) lists names of writers and works who had influenced Mitchell. He may have transcribed the list just as it was spoken by Mitchell, though he only says, after interrupting it, "The list of models goes on." We have no idea whether the list is extracted by Sims from a larger, discursively more varied context, or whether Mitchell in fact reeled off yet another list in conversation, like that of the race horses. Referring to Sims, however, Rogers (2009: 47/a) quotes Mitchell as saying in that interview, "'We [he and A.J. Liebling] talked a lot about books but not our own writing. We preferred to talk about how Stendhal did it,'" and follows it with this claim: "He [i.e., Mitchell] then added a long list of literary models he admired." This may be merely a misreading of Sims' account, but if so it is nonetheless telling: anyone who admires Mitchell, who knows Mitchell's style, expects him to do some reeling, so Rogers' may be a true misreading. As Aloff (1993: 18/d) puts it, in any one of Mitchell's stories, "[t]here will probably be at least one Joycean catalogue of lingo or proper names." Joyce, of course, is in the list of influences reported by Sims.

5 A reader might suppose that I am cherry-picking examples and perhaps exaggerating a peripheral feature of Mitchell's style into a central one. In fact, Mitchell's work is rife with the sort of naming illustrated in the examples chosen for the main text of this article. A quick survey of *Up in the Old Hotel* yields, for instance, a large number of lists of names (Mitchell, 1993: 6, 53, 55, 59, 86, 103, 106, 119, 120, 125, 134–135, 178, 221, 222, 253, 254, 269, 272, 281, 301, 305, 358, 369, 386, 392, 397, 405, 412, 418–419, 465, 467, 470, 471, 504, 506, 518, 521, 537, 538, 542, 578, 580, 585, 614, 633, 637, 648, 649, 667, and 677). Every list cited here has at least three items. Contiguous pages listed separately contain distinct lists. I may well have missed some lists along the way. Some lists are supplied by the narrator; others are provided by subjects of the articles, but selected for the narrative by the narrator, so, in terms of narrative, attributable to him (see n. 6). Some gaps between page numbers listed above are filled by quotations in the main text of this article. By the count in this note, there are 50 lists, 37 items in the book's table of contents — of quite various lengths — covering 716 pages in total. But the lists listed here barely express Mitchell's onomastic interests: they cover personal names, place names, and titles of songs, etc., but not folk taxonomy or genealogies, nor yet names appreciated for their sound or color, nicknames, or the act of naming. "The Downfall of Fascism in Black Ankle County" (1939) does not contain any lists, but it does focus on Messrs. Catfish Giddy and Spuddy Ransom, as well as Uncle Bowleg, which is probably, when it comes to names, all that needs to be said.

6 In the early journalism, too, one notices tendencies in Mitchell's style — the examples cited here are neither unusual nor isolated in *My Ears Are Bent*; see Mitchell (2001: 31, 122, 123, and 125) for more instances of this sort of implied or potential but unrealized list. Mitchell ended an item about the *New Yorker* cartoonist and illustrator William Steig with "Asked to name some cartoonists whose work he respects, he began with James Thurber and named about twenty" (2001: 274). Again, later Mitchell would have reported the names Steig reeled off. This is not to say, however, that the

early journalism never includes lists of names (see Mitchell, 2001: 68, 145 and 151) or focuses on names and naming (see Mitchell, 2001: 110 and 136).

[7] Reflecting on his art, Mitchell explained, "'The creative aspect of [such reporting] is the particularity of the facts that you choose, and the particularity of the conversations that you choose, and the fact that you stayed with the man long enough to get a panoply of conversations from which you can choose the ones that you decide are most significant'" (Sims, 2008: 99). There is a lot of onomastics in those facts, or in the particulars of conversations that supply Mitchell with facts to quote. The architecture of any of Mitchell's essays depends on selection.

[8] In turning to Russell, I am not suggesting that he is right, but rather that he evinces a certain attitude about names and naming relevant to intersections of ontology, epistemology, and narrative in Mitchell's work. I might have turned instead to Saul Kripke, who in "Naming and Necessity" (1972) sees names as meaningful designators, rather than as indicators without meaning. For Kripke, meaning arises from contexts in which the designated exists — even fictional characters exist in some contexts. Because it proposes the ontological efficacy of names and naming, we might think of Kripke's attitude towards names as more "optimistic" than Russell's. I have chosen Russell because this article ends with melancholy, and his onomastic "pessimism" better fits my argument.

[9] Of course, older citizens may occasionally forget names they have long known well, but Mitchell was intensely concerned to remember names. Sims (2007: 172) relates, "During one meeting, he told me a story about a New York anarchist, Carlo Tresca, from the thirties. He couldn't remember the name of the restaurant where they met once. Losing that detail at age eighty-one annoyed him. He called the *New Yorker* fact-checking department to see if anyone could retrieve for him the name of a restaurant that had probably been out of business for forty years." Today, of course, he might have checked Wikipedia on his phone, but such tenacity in recovering the name suggests that it had more importance for him than it would have had for many, who would wait for it to occur to them later or shrug the forgetting off.

[10] This name-avoidance may have been a psychopathological reflex, too. Mitchell remembered of his childhood that his father once "was unhappy [. . .] when he found that Joseph had written his name on the ceiling of the old train depot, and chided his scion, 'Don't write your name in public places'" (Rundus, 1995: 6), an admonition somewhat inconsistent with the writing life, but never far from his recollection.

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