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# Ayn Rand's *Anthem*: Self-Naming, Individualism, and Anonymity

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Ayn Rand's dystopian novella *Anthem* is set in an unspecified future, physically and spiritually desolate, with enforced uniformity and a language bereft of all singular pronouns. *Anthem*, moreover, is profoundly deficient regarding onomastics in general. The society assigns personal names at birth using a fixed pattern: an abstract word, a single-digit number, a hyphen, and four additional digits. This system befits a society in which one can be condemned for committing the "Sin of Preference," concerning professions, privacy, or partners. In a world from which most names (for cities, buildings, streets, institutions etc.) have disappeared, the system of assigned anthroponyms is not the source of a problem or the epitome of a problem, but rather, the final downward step of an increasingly nameless culture. The two main characters, in successive episodes of purposeful self-naming, subvert the discourse of the decline and thus reclaim individualism and volition.

KEYWORDS dystopia, individualism, speculative fiction, anthroponyms, literary onomastics, Ayn Rand.

## Names and anonymity in Ayn Rand's Anthem

Ayn Rand's dystopian novella *Anthem* (1938, revised and republished in 1946) is set in an unspecified future, physically and spiritually desolate, one that fits Mark Hillegas's phrase for the novels of H. G. Wells: "the future as nightmare" (1967: 1). Technological achievements (such as "steel towers, flying ships, power wires") are no more than a distant legend (Rand, 1995: 102). Enforced uniformity is ever-present. An impoverished language, bereft of all singular pronouns, exemplifies deprivation and loss. Time has run backwards, and innovation is unknown. Nothing, from the reader's perspective, is new — with the single exception of the names of the fictional characters.

The society assigns personal names at birth using a fixed pattern: a word, a single-digit number, a hyphen, and four additional digits. The initial names of the two main

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characters, according to this system, are *Equality 7-2521* and *Liberty 5-3000*. In the course of the novella's events, the two of them subvert and modify the system of naming. They do so more than once. Their names thus function not only as descriptors or identifiers, but as markers in the narrative, such that the names they use can be matched closely with the reader's progress through the narrative.

The current article will explain and explore the reasons for the system of personal names and the implications of its subversion; in addition, it will comment on the name of the text itself. First, though, it is necessary to situate the practices of personal naming within the general practice of naming within *Anthem*. Why? Because the personal naming system is not the source of a problem or the epitome of a problem, but rather, the final downward step of an increasingly nameless culture.

The system of assigned numerical anthroponyms may be irksome, but the virtual absence of all other names is worse. The real world and most literary works are rich in names (International Council of Onomastic Societies, ICOS, 2016). This novella, however, presents a world from which names have overwhelmingly disappeared. There are no place names that are not purely functional. There are no toponyms beyond the generic references to *the City* and *the World*. The city in which the novella begins is *the City*, with no further narrowing. There are no chrematonyms beyond the generic and purely functional, i.e. *the Council of Scholars* (of which the chief accomplishment is the invention, 100 years earlier, of the candle) and *the Council of Eugenics* (which pairs up men and women for the yearly meeting in the Palace of Mating). The name of *the Palace of Mating* is typical of names of buildings, i.e. there are no oeconyms beyond the generic and blatantly obvious. Children reside in *the Home of the Infants* until they are old enough for *the Home of the Students*. After their vocations are assigned, they live in places associated with, and named for, their occupations, such as *the Home of the Clerks* or *the Home of the Street Sweepers*. For that matter, there are no hodonyms. When the Street Sweepers sweep the streets, those streets are nameless streets. There are no hydronyms (beyond such functional designations as *the City Cesspool*), and no oronyms; for example, there is no name for the stream in which the hero first beholds his own image (Rand, 1995: 79–80) or the chain of mountains the hero crosses (1995: 88).

How many cities are there, and how is one city different from another? There are no names to provide information or background. Although we are told that there is a *City Council*, a *State Council*, and a *World Council*, there is no way to tell what these might be (other than that the world is the totality). We do not know the size of the known world. The hero refers at one point to "the thousands who walk this earth" (Rand, 1995: 36), but there is no reason to think that he knows the actual population. How far apart is one city from another? How many streets are there in any given city, and how is one street different from another? There are no names to guide us.

In real-world societies, places are typically named on a specific basis other than function; they are named, for example, after historical incidents, topographical descriptions, or humorous associations (Baker and Carmony, 1975: xii–xx). Cities have names which, typically, distinguish them from other cities. Streets have names that distinguish them from other streets. Buildings have names that distinguish them from other buildings. Names set identifying, defining limits. As George R. Stewart states: "All naming of places stems from one basic motive, that is, the desire to identify a place and thus distinguish it from others" (1954: 1).

*Anthem* has nothing of the kind. It is a world in which nothing is allowed to stand out. Nothing is worth naming if there is no purpose in differentiating it. There are no unique designations for institutions. The only noun used to describe an aggregate is *Council*, occasionally qualified only by *City* (unnamed) or *World* (presumably consisting of all the nameless cities), and accompanied by a prepositional phrase denoting the purview of the aggregate (*Council of Vocations*) or the constituents of the aggregate (*Council of Scholars*).

In *Anthem*, the words that would, in the real world, be proper nouns, denoting particular places and things, are simply common nouns, masquerading as proper nouns by the use of the upper case. The use of the definite article (*the City Cesspool*) indicates that these purely functional designations are not names in the usual sense. The names in question are common not only in the sense that they are grammatically common nouns as opposed to proper nouns, but common also in the sense that their meaning is obvious and familiar.

The apparent exceptions prove the rule. The area beyond the City is known as *the Uncharted Forest*. This is a unique place, but it is known by its negative adjective, and it has, one might say, a negative identity: it is the place that is outside.

Another exception, a name with a meaning that is not immediately clear, is *the Home of the Useless*. The "useless," in the society of *Anthem*, are those who are over 40 years of age, and therefore deemed too old to be employed in any of the known vocations, e.g. Scholar, Teacher, Street Sweeper, or Peasant. They are "useless" because they cannot work. Their uselessness, which is specific to the novella's social context, is an appropriate explanation of the name of the place within the context of that society.

*Anthem*, then, is presented by the author as approaching total anonymity. The disappearance of names accords with the overall regression in society. By dispensing with names, by approaching anonymity, the society in *Anthem* is on the road to abandoning basic humanity. As George R. Stewart eloquently says: "Man has been described as 'the thinker,' 'the tool-maker,' and in many other terms. We can also describe him as 'Man, the namer'" (1975: 5). Absent the actions of the hero, however, the people in this society would soon lose the privilege of being described as "Man, the namer."

## Personal names and the novella's narrative

The novella begins at the point when the language has already abandoned most names. The system of assigning numerical personal names is in fact a preparation for the disappearance of personal names as well. When names are unconnected with any individual choices, when names are virtually unmemorable, those names have no purpose, and will not last.

Examining the system of personal names within *Anthem* is an exception to the traditional study of onomastics, in which the reader attempts to understand the naming choices made by the author. "An artist's naming of his or her characters frequently involves calculated and conscious choices in order to deliver a message through the onomastic medium. Creative writers give names to their characters to send messages to prospective readers" (Nuessel, 1992: 39). Traditionally, one might scrutinize a particular name for its etymology, connotation, historical precedent, or literary allusion; one might analyze the relationships between the names of characters who have personal

relationships. When asking why the writer has given a character a particular name, one might reasonably expect to find an answer.

In *Anthem*, however, the premise of the novella is that characters' names, as they appear originally, are not given by the author for some discoverable purpose. Rather, they are assigned primarily on the basis of a routine pattern and, within that pattern, randomly. There is, in effect, no author for the assigned names. Within *Anthem*, chosen names arise only later on, and the two main characters themselves are the ones who choose. They become the authors of their own names as they become the agents of their own lives.

The climax of their development in this area appears in the final chapter. The hero has run away from the City to the Uncharted Forest, protecting the electric light he invented after the Council of Scholars rejected the gift of his discovery. The heroine has followed him. They have found a home built in the days before the decline, and here they have discovered books. In his reading, he has learned not only of the crucial singular first-person pronoun, but also of the importance of names.

In the novella's final chapter, he says: "It is not proper for men to be without names." He continues: "There was a time when each man had a name of his own to distinguish him from all other men. So let us choose our names" (Rand, 1995: 98). He states that names, which serve to distinguish people from each other, should be self-chosen, rather than externally and arbitrarily assigned. From the standpoint of the collective, the differences between individuals do not matter. This passage functions as the culmination of his discovery that he is an individual, a name should reflect that singular nature, and the prevalent system of naming is unsatisfactory. The number-names appeared to distinguish one person from all other people, i.e. there was no one else known as Equality 7-2521. The system, however, amounted to a betrayal of humanity and individuality. In order to escape, fully and finally, from the society in which they have lived sub-human lives, Equality 7-2521 and Liberty 5-3000 need to choose their own names. Doing so will be a milestone in the journey that begins on the first page.

## The hero's name at the outset: Equality 7-2521

In the first and longest of the 12 chapters, we are introduced to the city and the society, through the private notebook of the protagonist, a 21-year-old man who is also the narrator. The lack of singular pronouns means that the word "we" in the novella can refer to the speaker alone, or to the speaker plus others. This in itself requires the reader to slow down, in order to be sure of the meaning: Does the word "they" refer to a single person or to more than one? The narrator is writing for himself, and is evidently not aware of the potential confusion. The author, however, provides guidance to the perplexed. For example, when the protagonist is writing his journal, hidden in a tunnel, he says: "And now there is nothing here save our one body, and it is strange to see only two legs stretched on the ground, and on the wall before us the shadow of our one head" (Rand, 1995: 17). We readers know, therefore, that if we were observing the tunnel, we would see only one body, two legs, and one head, notwithstanding the first-person plural used for the pronouns.

The speaker tells us: "Our name is Equality 7-2521, as it is written on the iron bracelet which all men wear on their left wrists with their names upon it" (Rand, 1995: 18). Again, the pronoun "Our" does not mean that the speaker is plural: there is only one name. His

name follows the pattern: a single word (Equality), a single-digit number (7), a hyphen, and a four-digit number (2521). This pattern, Ayn Rand later explains, was derived from telephone exchange numbers as they existed in the 1930s (Rand, 1998: 122–123). That this pattern no longer characterizes telephone exchanges, which are typically conveyed now as a set of numbers, is inadvertent. The naming system, at the time of the novella's composition, reflected a technology that itself had disappeared: in the world of *Anthem*, telephones do not exist.

The numbers, moreover, have unpleasant associations, including one that is powerfully present for readers of the second edition, published in 1946. A post-Holocaust audience might well envision the numbers on the wrists of concentration camp prisoners (Nuessel, 1992: 16–17). Numbers, however, have long been associated with prisoners in fact and in fiction. Jean Valjean, in Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables*, endures years of confronting Javert, the police inspector who refuses to see him as anything but Prisoner 24601.

The words preceding the numerals are political slogans: "*Alliance*," "*Collective*," "*Equality*," "*Fraternity*," "*Harmony*," "*International*," "*Similarity*," "*Solidarity*," "*Unanimity*," and "*Union*." These words, implicitly or explicitly, refer to a collective, viewed positively. "*Harmony*" suggests the accord of different elements, and thus implicitly suggests that the parts are in accord with each other and with the whole, there is no discord or disagreement, and no one or nothing stands out as an exception. (The one clear exception will be discussed below, in connection with the second chapter.) The very fact that names are assigned by the social system at large, rather than through any personal association, dramatizes the prohibition of choice within the society. In *Anthem*, one can be condemned for committing the "Sin of Preference," regarding professions, privacy, or partners.

For most readers, this system of naming makes it harder to remember each name. We are unaccustomed to memorizing numbers. The slogan-words are too often applied to multiple characters. We encounter more than one character whose name begins with "*International*" and "*Solidarity*," and the repetition of the word does not make the name easier to remember. To remember the name, one needs to remember the number. The numbers, however, do not present any memorable patterns or hooks.

The characters' names do not help the reader to identify the novella's characters. The reader of *Anthem* is in special need of cues because the language lacks all singular pronouns, including "he" and "she." When pronouns are ungendered, the characters' names are potentially significant because a name could indicate gender. The names in this society, however, offer no information regarding gender. These names are thus of little practical use as aids to recognition.

In the opening chapters of the novella, the hero attempts to live, love, and labor on his own. He experiences thoughts he shares only in his private journal. He performs solitary scientific experiments with stolen materials in a secret tunnel. He sees a woman he comes to love. The naming system, throughout, is an additional hindrance to our ability to grasp the details of his world. He lives in a society, but the persons with whom he interacts are, for the most part, concealed in an undifferentiated fog.

The prevalent confusion is the apparent purpose of the virtually indistinguishable names. The names enable and foster the fog. As he says:

> We must strive to be like all our brother men, for all men must be alike. Over the portals of the Palace of the World Council, there are words cut in the marble, which we repeat to ourselves whenever we are tempted:
>
> *"We are one in all, and all in one.*
>
> *There are no men, but only the great WE.*
>
> *One, indivisible and forever."* (Rand, 1995: 19)

All people must be alike. Although the number-names are not entirely identical, they are sufficiently undifferentiated that they do not help the reader to remember them. It is reasonable to assume that, even if the characters can remember each other's "names," the fog of abstract slogans and patternless numbers minimizes to a vanishingly tiny extent the ability of the name to stand for a distinct person. Without individualized names, they lack identifiable individuality.

## New names for the hero and heroine: Unconquered and Golden One

The fog, though, is not final. The narrative development of the main characters accompanies the development of their names. In the second chapter, the male protagonist, Equality 7-2521, is attracted to a woman:

> It is our second Transgression of Preference, for we do not think of all our brothers, as we must, but only of one, and their name is Liberty 5-3000. We do not know why we think of them. We do not know why, when we think of them, we feel of a sudden that the earth is good and that it is not a burden to live. (Rand, 1995: 41)

The one slogan-word that has nothing to do with the collective is "*Liberty*." Although its adoption by the society was perhaps due to the association with "Equality" and "Fraternity" in the slogan of the French Revolution, its use stands out in a society that has no liberty whatsoever. Perhaps this very word is due for extinction soon: it points to free will, the exercise of which is forbidden, in a society where preference is a transgression. The name Liberty 5-3000, moreover, is the name given to the heroine, the woman who loves the hero and who follows him in his physical and psychological escape.

The author, then, has throughout presented the random system of naming characteristic of the novella's society (in which names are selected randomly). Here, though, is one example of a name the creation of which might pertain to the naming system in a traditional text, wherein the author chooses names for particular associations (including ironic associations). It is, to be sure, still a name that fits the pattern (one word, a single digit, a hyphen, and four more digits), but the word "*Liberty*" here, a variation on the pattern, stands out.

This variation on the pattern, the presentation of a name that does not quite fit, is accompanied by a more radical departure from the naming system. The hero, who begins by repeating the woman's official name, goes on to replace that name:

> We do not think of them as Liberty 5-3000 any longer. We have given them a name in our thoughts. We call them the Golden One. But it is a sin to give men names which distinguish them from other men. Yet we call them the Golden One, for they are not like the others. The Golden One are not like the others. (Rand, 1995: 41)

The invention of a replacement name is a sin. The reason appears to be that this name, unlike the patterned names, distinguishes one person from all others. Evidently the patterned names do not do that in a meaningful sense. The invented name, moreover, includes the word "one," a word implying the very individuality that is forbidden by the society.

The attraction is mutual, and so is the desire to confer a name on the beloved. As he has mentally given her a personal name, so she has mentally given him a personal name. Days later, in the fourth chapter:

> "We have given you a name in our thoughts, Liberty 5-3000."
>
> "What is our name?" they asked."The Golden One."
>
> "Nor do we call you Equality 7-2521 when we think of you."
>
> "What name have you given us?"They looked straight into our eyes and they held their head high and they answered:
>
> "The Unconquered."
>
> For a long time we could not speak. Then we said:
>
> "Such thoughts as these are forbidden, Golden One."
>
> "But you think such thoughts as these and you wish us to think them." (Rand, 1995: 55–56)

Each gives the other a name to capture an emotional essence: he has named her *the Golden One*, and she has named him *the Unconquered*. The types of names here are a form of "name symbolism." "In this approach, a name is selected that summarizes a character's personality or physiology or some other unique property" (Nuessel, 1992: 39). The private acts of non-sanctioned naming took place first in the separate, individual minds of each character, and only later in a forbidden conversation between them. The act of conferring a name is an act of definition before it becomes an act of relationship. He re-names her in his mind, and she similarly re-names him in her mind, before they consider the prospect of revealing the new names, or of re-naming themselves.

The giving and acceptance of a name, in this scene, is the marker of a new type of relationship with another individual. Our hero has always known that he is unique, that he is unlike his brothers. His uniqueness matters to him. He has observed differences among his fellow students and workers, but he has not treasured their uniqueness. Never before has it been supremely important to him that another human being is unique. Never before has it been supremely important to another human being that he is unique.

> "You are not one of our brothers, Equality 7-2521, for we do not wish you to be."
>
> We cannot say what they meant, for there are no words for their meaning, but we know it without words and we knew it then.
>
> "No," we answered, "nor are you one of our sisters."
>
> "If you see us among scores of women, will you look upon us?'
>
> "We shall look upon you, Liberty 5-3000, if we see you among all the women of the earth." (Rand, 1995: 43)

The two characters are, one might say, the same in being different, and the bond between them depends on the way they look at each other, the names they give each other in their minds and, eventually, the names they speak aloud in each other's company.

## Final names for the hero and heroine: Prometheus and Gaea

The third stage of their choice of personal names occurs in the twelfth chapter, after their escape from the City. Ecstatic in their shared solitude, they travel onward, away from the City, and find a beautiful modern house, fully stocked with books. Reading these books, the hero finds the word that had become unspeakable in his society — the first-person singular — the word "I."

> It was when I read the first of the books I found in my house that I saw the word "I." And when I understood this word, the book fell from my hands, and I wept, I who had never known tears. I wept in deliverance and in pity for all mankind.
>
> I understood the blessed thing which I had called my curse. I understood why the best in me had been my sins and my transgressions; and why I had never felt guilt in my sins. I understood that centuries of chains and lashes will not kill the spirit of man nor the sense of truth within him.
>
> I read many books for many days. Then I called the Golden One, and I told her what I had read and what I had learned. She looked at me and the first words she spoke were: "I love you." (Rand, 1995: 98)

The discovery of the word "I" makes the hero weep in deliverance and pity, in pride and inspiration. He does not stop reading for days. When he puts down the books, he tells his beloved what he has learned. She responds by using the new word, the word "I," to confirm her understanding and their bond. He then shares what he has learned about names, and says that they should choose their names.

> "My dearest one, it is not proper for men to be without names. There was a time when each man had a name of his own to distinguish him from all other men. So let us choose our names. I have read of a man who lived many thousands of years ago, and of all the names in these books, his is the one I wish to bear. He took the light of the gods and he brought it to men, and he taught men to be gods. And he suffered for his deed as all bearers of light must suffer. His name was Prometheus."
>
> "It shall be your name," said the Golden One.
>
> "And I have read of a goddess," I said, "who was the mother of the earth and of all the gods. Her name was Gaea. Let this be your name, my Golden One, for you are to be the mother of a new kind of gods."
>
> "It shall be my name," said the Golden One. (Rand, 1995: 98–99)

The choosing involves his explaining the meaning of two names, and her affirming that these are to be theirs. Their final names, which he discovers through reading and which she affirms, are *Prometheus* and *Gaea*, designating their future respective roles as bringer of knowledge and creator of a new earth. The new names and the new world begin here. Regarding both names, he has acted as author. Just as the author of a novel or play chooses literary names for their associations, he has chosen names for the two of

them. He has also acted, in effect, as a reference work or literary critic in explaining the relevant elements of the history of each name.

The third stage of names is an advance on the second stage. *The Golden One* and *the Unconquered* are descriptive names constructed by elevating common nouns to the status of proper nouns, as was done in *Anthem* with the designation of places. The third stage of names involves adoption through adaptation of personal names drawn from mythology. This is similar to an established practice studied in literary onomastics, as noted by Nuessel: "Another device used by authors to give their characters' names special connotative significance is biblical names to link a protagonist's behavior to that of a recognizable figure from the Bible" (1992: 39).

The personal naming system in the society of *Anthem*, as noted above, was cumbersome and impersonal, with no connection between the individual and the name. However, it was, as is shown by the contrast with the lack of any distinctive names for places, better than nothing, and an indication that even a society that is erasing individualism has not utterly dispensed with identifying names. It amounts to a feeble attempt to hold ground, a system in which neither the society nor Ayn Rand as author has made any attempt to make a connection between the patterned name and the fictional character (with the possible exception of Liberty 5-3000). The novella's hero and heroine not only hold that ground, but advance towards individualism by recovering what has been lost. After giving and accepting descriptive names, they give and accept historical names. In so doing, they have seized the function of naming itself. They have taken on the role of the author in literary onomastics and have become the authors of their own lives.

## Conclusion: Anthem and "Ego"

The character O'Brien in George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949) tells Winston Smith: "If you want a picture of the future, imagine a boot stamping on a human face — forever" (1981 [1949]: 220). Orwell, who was almost certainly familiar with Ayn Rand's novella, has written what amounts to a sinister prequel of the political and philosophical trends that would lead to *Anthem* (Milgram, 2005: 149–154). In the time period depicted in *Anthem*, the boot has been stomping for years beyond number, and the last vestiges of the human face are vanishing. *Anthem* is Orwellian in another way as well: its linguistic features represent the culmination of Newspeak, in which language is drained of specificity and differentiation. As explained in Orwell's appendix: "Newspeak was designed not to extend but to *diminish* the range of thought, and this process was indirectly assisted by cutting the choice of words down to a minimum" (1981 [1949]: 247). The disappearance of the singular pronouns in *Anthem* is the result of the intention of diminishing the range of thought to the point where individualism becomes unspeakable, and unthinkable. It is possible, however, to reverse that process. Prometheus and Gaea, never again to be known by the names Equality 7-2521 and Liberty 5-3000, will recover the lost concepts and the lost words.

The final paragraphs of *Anthem* read as follows:

> And here, over the portals of my fort, I shall cut into stone the word which is to be my beacon and my banner. The word which will not die, should we all perish in battle. The word which can never die on this earth, for it is the heart of it and the meaning and the glory.The sacred word: EGO. (Rand, 1995: 104–105)

*Ego* was initially intended by Ayn Rand to be the novella's title. This word, according to Leonard Peikoff, "designates the mind (and its attributes) considered as an individual possession" (1995: v). The working title, though, appeared to Ayn Rand to "give away to the reader too much too soon and too dryly" (Peikoff, 1995: vi). The novella, he writes: "was from the outset an ode to man's ego. It was not difficult, therefore, to change the working title: to move from 'ego' to 'ode' or 'anthem,' leaving the object celebrated by the ode to be discovered by the reader" (1995: vi). Hence the new name is a subtle, indirect, enigmatic approach to the theme identified by the original name. We start with the question, in effect, in the new title. The original title, however, was still at the core of the book. It is the final word and also, appropriately, has the final word.

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