"Harry, You *Must* Stop Living in the Past:" Names as Acts of Recall in John Updike's *Rabbit Angstrom*

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This paper studies the function of names as a stylistic device in literary fiction. The data are taken from John Updike's *Rabbit* series, which depicts the life of US American Everyman Harry "Rabbit" Angstrom from the late 1950s to the 1980s. Special focus is on Harry's peculiar habit of calling people and places by names that are no longer up to date: former nicknames, maiden names, names of shops that have gone out of business. It is argued that, in so doing, Harry is recurrently invoking memories of his own past. Updike's use of names here reinforces, on an onomastic level, one of the major motifs of the novel: the protagonist's infatuation with a former version of himself.

KEYWORDS literary onomastics, memory, layering, US American postwar literature, John Updike, Rabbit Angstrom

Introduction

In Chapter 3 of her insightful study on names in the work of James Joyce, Culleton (1994) observes that:

> [t]hroughout life, our names often change because we are constantly being evaluated and reevaluated – our nominal identities move from parental nicknames, to childhood tag names, to adolescent counterparts, to adult names; and in between, each of us assumes and shrugs off a host of other generated names. (74)

This multitude of "nominal identities" an individual adopts over time constitutes the point of departure for the present paper. It explores the use of names in one major work of US American postwar literature, John Updike's *Rabbit Angstrom* (1995). The focus is on how names from different biographical stages

function as a stylistic device that achieves two interrelated effects. On a general level, the coexistence of older and newer names creates chronological depth by closely aligning the reader with the protagonist's memories. A second, more specific effect is that the protagonist's conspicuous preference for older names betrays a strong emotional attachment to the past. As will be shown, his use of names here replicates, on the level of onomastics, an important motif of the series as a whole. To bring home this point, the analysis will present three case studies that demonstrate the main character's peculiar way of naming the people and places around him: his wife, an old friend of hers, and a downtown restaurant.

Background

John Updike's Rabbit is among the most famous figures in US American postwar literature. Rabbit's real name is Harry Angstrom, who once was the star of his high school basketball team. This brought him some temporary fame in the local area, the fictive Pennsylvania town of Brewer, where most of the story is set. Harry's life is described in four novels, *Rabbit, Run* (1960), *Rabbit Redux* (1971), *Rabbit is Rich* (1981), and *Rabbit at Rest* (1990a). These were later published as a single volume titled *Rabbit Angstrom* (1995).

Each novel covers a different stage of Harry's life. In *Rabbit, Run*, Harry is 26 and his glory days as an athlete are already a thing of the past. It is 1959 and he now works as a hawker for kitchen gadgets to sustain his small family, son Nelson and his newly-pregnant wife Janice. Wearied by the daily humdrum of adult life, he runs away from home several times, thus indirectly causing the death of the newborn baby. *Rabbit Redux* returns to the story in 1969. Harry has become a linotype operator, and now it is Janice who leaves him for another man. After much turmoil, including a runaway girl who dies when their house is set on fire, Harry and Janice get back together again at the end of the novel. *Rabbit is Rich* is set another ten years later, at the end of the 1970s. Harry now is the head of Springer Motors, the car agency founded by Janice's late father. Son Nelson starts his own family and Harry sees the birth of his first grandchild, foreshadowing his own decline and loss of importance. *Rabbit at Rest* covers the time from December 1988, when Harry has his first heart attack, to September 1989, when he dies of a second one, at age 56. A follow-up novella, *Rabbit Remembered*, describes what happened to the Angstrom family after Harry's untimely death, and provides a moderately happy ending. It is set around the turn of the century (Updike 2000).

In total, the Rabbit series thus spans the whole period from the end of the 1950s to the late 1990s. This opens up an intriguing long-term perspective on Harry's life and the people that surround him. Not only do we experience with him the bigger and smaller events as they occur in the novels, but we also

remember these events, just as Harry remembers them. As Updike specialist Jack De Bellis (2000) puts it:

> Part of the joy of reading the four novels consecutively is that we participate in Rabbit's recall. Thus when he reflects on a key image or line of dialogue, the reader does as well; the result is a greater identification with Rabbit and a more profound sense that he is like us, remembering images and events and putting them into the brain's inventory. (357)

As I will argue in this paper, these acts of recall often get prompted by Harry's somewhat odd use of names. Throughout the series, he shows a consistent preference for names that are not quite "up to date" – names from the past. Referencing people and places in this way, Harry habitually seems to unearth onomastic material from earlier stages of his life. In such instances, the act of naming itself becomes an act of remembering, call becomes recall. The resulting semiotic tension – a past name to be mapped onto a present referent – creates a very real effect of chronologic depth that psychologically links the reader with the protagonist's personal history. Borrowing a term from historical linguistics, I will refer to this coexistence of older and newer names as onomastic layering (e.g. Hopper 1991). The term is meant here to include both the act of naming itself, as done by Harry, and its use as a stylistic device, by Updike.

The concept of layering differs from the more comprehensive notion of variation, which includes all instances of coexisting names for one referent at a given point in time. Layering is confined to the coexistence of only those names that derive from different points in time and thus indicate – and, in the argument put forward here, invoke – different chronological stages in the relationship between namer and named. Taking into account this hidden historicity of names, layering thus looks at traces of the past in the onomastic present. And, as the analysis will show, for Harry this past looms large.

Previous studies have looked at the names in the *Rabbit* books from a more customary angle. In a 1988 contribution to this journal, De Bellis has examined the names of major characters in the series with respect to their inherent symbolic meanings. An example is Harry's surname, *Angstrom*, which, as Updike (1990b, 24) admits, alludes to the German *angst* (De Bellis 1988, 31). A similar approach is taken by Baker et al. (2015), who explore the religious connotations in the names of two characters who feature prominently in *Rabbit, Run*. One of them is Reverend Eccles, in whose name the authors see an allusion to the biblical book of Ecclesiastes. This interpretation has also been proposed by other scholars (e.g. Pinsker 1993, 69; Wood 1998, 133), even though Updike himself explicitly ruled out any such relationship; just as he rejected a number of similarly motivated interpretations of his names in the *Rabbit* books (Updike 2016, 52).

This points to a general tendency in (literary) onomastics, where "names have often been viewed in a way which privileges etymological meaning above all else" (Bramwell 2016, 263). In many cases, as Coates (2018, 19) criticizes, this

focus on the Cratylic function of names necessarily opens up "considerable room to speculate what or whom the author had in mind, leading to ill-grounded assertion, pointless controversy and a plethora of *perhaps*es."

In what follows, I would like to present three case studies that demonstrate how names in the *Rabbit* series fulfil a number of functions that are entirely unrelated to their etymology and what possible meaning may, or may not, be derived from it. We start with a look at the most important female character in the series, Harry's wife Janice.

Love, Jan

Janice Angstrom, née Springer, is three years younger than Harry. They graduated from the same high school and get to know each other more closely while working at Kroll's, a department store in the center of the city. Harry and Janice start dating in 1955 and get married in March 1956. Their first child, Nelson, is born in October that year.

Throughout the series, Harry's wife is mostly called *Janice*, the default term both in the narrative passages and in the dialogues. In some cases, however, Updike chooses different ways to call her. One of them is the abbreviated form *Jan*, which first occurs early on in *Rabbit, Run*, when Harry is back from work on the first day recounted in the book. While arguing with his clumsy, half-drunk wife, he has to think of how things used to be when they were first seeing each other. He recalls how they would secretly meet in an apartment of a friend of Janice's;

> [a]fter work, working both at Kroll's then, she selling candy and cashews in a white smock with "Jan" stitched on her pocket and he lugging easy chairs and maple end tables around on the floor above. (Updike 1995, 13)

Things were different then, as Harry wistfully recalls. Janice "could be sudden." She was "[j]ust a girl," with "[n]erves like new thread" and skin that "smelled like fresh cotton" (Updike 1995, 13). It is at this early point in the book that Updike first lets us share the protagonist's fond memories of his wife. And these include not only how she behaved and smelled back then, but also the way she was called. In those days she was not *Janice*, but *Jan*.

A similar scene of Rabbit reminiscing on these early beginnings is described in *Rabbit Redux*. In this second novel of the series, Janice leaves Harry to move in with her lover Charlie. She tells Harry so via a note on the kitchen table signed "Love, Jan." Interestingly, Harry's first reaction on reading the note relates not so much to its contents as to the way it is signed. Here are his thoughts:

> 'Jan' - her name from the years she used to work at Kroll's selling salted nuts in the smock with *Jan* stitched above the pocket in script. In those days some afternoons they would go to Linda Hammacher's apartment up on Eighth Street. The horizontal rose rays as the sun set behind the great gray gas-holder. The wonder of it as she let him slip off all her clothes. Underwear more substantial then: stocking

snaps to undo, the marks of elastic printed on her skin. Jan. That name suspended in her these fifteen years; the notes she left for him around the house were simply signed 'J.' (339)

Even though the two names, *Janice* and *Jan*, refer to the same person, to Harry each of them means something different. The former is his wife's everyday name, commonly abbreviated into just "J." when she is writing him these more mundane notes. By contrast, *Jan* evokes memories of those happier days when their relationship was still young and full of passion. Reading it now, on the piece of paper before him, Harry realizes how the *Jan* got "suspended in her" in the course of their marriage, but that it was never entirely gone. The emotional friction this produces is experienced not only by Harry, but the reader, by now well aware of the differences between *Janice* and *Jan*, becomes part of it, too.

The very special meaning of *Jan* to Harry can also be gathered from a passage in the later parts of *Rabbit is Rich*, the third book in the series. During a vacation to the Bahamas with two acquainted couples, it is agreed that they will swap partners for two nights. Though this is very much what Harry has been hoping for all along, feeling strongly attracted to his friend Webb Murkett's girlish wife Cindy, he reacts rather sensitively when Webb, who has spent the first night with Janice, calls her *Jan*. "Jan, is it now?" the narrative voice irritably observes (Updike 1995, 1007). While Harry does not seem to take issue with the physical intimacy between Webb and Janice that occurred during the night, he does object to the emotional intimacy contained in *Jan*, a name he is obviously not willing to share with a man who lacks access to the relevant past.

A second term of interest with respect to onomastic layering is *Mrs. Angstrom*, the corresponding V address to the T form *Janice* (Brown and Ford 1961). A scene in the earlier part of *Rabbit is Rich* reveals that, even decades after his marriage with Janice, Harry still occasionally has problems mapping the term on his wife. Here is what happens: Harry and Janice have spent an inebriated afternoon with some friends at the golf club. The merry gathering is abruptly terminated when a waitress appears at the poolside terrace to inform them of a phone call for "Mrs. Angstrom." When he hears the waitress using this address term, her words "shock Harry, as if his mother has been resurrected" (Updike 1995, 681). His reaction here indicates that, at least when preoccupied with other things,[1] Harry's default referent for *Mrs. Angstrom* is not his wife but his late mother.

Compare this to when, in one of the more miserable scenes later on in the same book, Harry complains to himself that "[h]e'll never fuck anybody again in his lifetime except poor Janice Springer" (Updike 1995, 936). As these examples show, Harry's mental processing of his wife's surname(s) often falls back on pre-marriage conditions – when Janice Angstrom was still *Janice Springer* and the only *Mrs. Angstrom* in his world his mother. In the former case, a present referent is identified by an old name, while in the latter a present name is mistakenly attached to an old referent. In both cases, names entail acts of recall.

Foster, Fogleman, Fosnacht

A second character of interest is Peggy Fosnacht, neé Gring, who is a classmate and old friend of Janice's. She is featured predominantly in *Rabbit, Run*, where she looks after Janice while Harry has left her, and in *Rabbit Redux*, where she starts an affair with Harry after Janice has left him. She makes a brief reappearance in *Rabbit is Rich* but, as we learn in *Rabbit at Rest*, dies of breast cancer shortly afterwards. She lives with her husband Ollie in a complicated on-off relationship.

The text contains a number of scenes that reveal how Harry's naming of Peggy is based on reference points that are anchored in the past. Most importantly, and in a more conspicuous way than with Janice, Harry's narrative keeps zigzagging between her maiden and her marital name. For instance, after the tragic death of Janice and Harry's baby, we are informed that "Peggy Fosnacht comes" to visit Janice, yet only a day later, at the funeral parlor, Harry notices that "[t]he only one he knows is Peggy Gring" (Updike 1995, 239, 249). As in the case of Janice, the shift between the two names here connects the reader to different stages of Harry's life.[2]

A key scene in this respect is when Peggy is first introduced in *Rabbit, Run*. Having temporarily left Janice for another woman, Harry is now in frequent contact with Reverend Eccles, who has been requested by Janice's parents to look after their son-in-law. When Harry asks Eccles about Janice's condition, the following dialogue unfolds:

> "I dropped by Monday morning to tell them you were in the county. Your wife was in the back yard with your boy and what I took to be an old girl friend, a Mrs. – Foster? Fogleman?"
> "What did she look like?"
> "I don't really know. I was distracted by her sunglasses. They were the mirror kind, with very wide sidepieces."
> "Oh, Peggy Gring. She's walleyed. She was in Janice's high-school class and married that jerk Ollie Fosnacht."
> "Fosnacht. That's right. Like the doughnut. I knew there was something local about the name." (108)

The exchange strongly suggests that there is an overall preference in Harry's mind for *Gring* over *Fosnacht*. Firstly, he cannot retrieve *Fosnacht* from Eccles' two (fairly close) approximations *Foster* and *Fogleman*,[3] but manages to construe the respective person only after Eccles provides additional, non-onomastic, information about Peggy. Secondly, when Harry finally understands whom Eccles is talking about, indicated by the change of state token "oh" (Heritage 1984), the first term of reference that comes flashing up in his mind is *Peggy Gring*. Even at this point, however, he still refuses to use her marital name, the one that Eccles is searching for, but merely grants that she is now married to "that jerk Ollie Fosnacht."

One explanation for Harry's preference for *Gring* over *Fosnacht* is that it seems to reconnect him with his past as a successful athlete. A most revealing scene in this

respect is when he reflects on how "Peggy Gring […] had seen him when he was good, had sat in those hot bleachers screaming, when he was a hero, naked and swift and lean" (536). The fact that it was Peggy Gring who saw him, not Peggy Fosnacht, may be the key to understanding why it is so hard for Harry to let go of her former name. We will come back to this point in the discussion section.

An Old Restaurant with a New Name

Updike's technique of onomastic layering is not confined to persons, but seems to work just as well with names of places. Perhaps the most striking example in the *Rabbit* series is a restaurant in the center of Brewer that was formerly called *Johnny Frye's Chophouse*. Even though – or perhaps, just because – the place gets first mentioned only in the third book, *Rabbit is Rich*, Updike makes sure it comes with some built-in history. Thus we learn that a friend of Nelson's has got a job as a waitress in a new restaurant; more precisely, "an old restaurant with a new name, The Crêpe House." As we are further informed, "before that it was the Café Barcelona, painted tiles and paella, iron grillwork and gazpacho" (Updike 1995, 699). And a few lines on we move even deeper into local history:

> Before the Crêpe House had been the Barcelona it had been for many years Johnny Frye's Chophouse, good solid food day and night for the big old-fashioned German eaters, who have eaten themselves pretty well into the grave by now, taking with them tons of pork chops and sauerkraut and a river of Sunflower Beer. (699)

Noteworthy about this passage is not only how Harry recalls, in vivid detail, each of the three stages in the development of the establishment – from Johnny Frye's Chophouse to the Café Barcelona and now the Crêpe House – but also, and even more so, that he keeps referring to it as *Johnny Frye's*. So he concludes that "[u]nder its newest name, Johnny Frye's is a success" (699). In other words, while Harry is perfectly aware that the restaurant's name (and cuisine) have changed, he stubbornly refuses to update his naming behavior accordingly.

While the Crêpe House must have had some initial success, by the time of *Rabbit at Rest* the business has changed hands again. It now

> calls itself Salad Binge, explaining in signs outside *Your Local Lo-Cal Eatery* and *Creative Soups and Organic Fresh-Food Health Dishes*, to attract the health-minded yuppies who work in the glass-skinned office building that has risen across from Kroll's.[4] (1259)

Needless to say, this latest change leaves Harry just as unimpressed as the previous ones. So when he asks his old friend Charlie out one day, he "suggests they have lunch at Johnny Frye's downtown" (1259). Curiously, the ghost of the old place also seems to linger on in the foods. Despite this long succession of new tenants and culinary concepts, Androne (2008, 339) observes that "the old calories keep creeping back in." With dishes like "Beefsteak Salad," "Pork Kabob Salad," and "Macadamia and Bacon Salad" on the menu, Salad Binge almost seems to prove Harry right in his use of the place's original name: "So underneath everything, Rabbit thinks, it's still Johnny Frye's Chophouse" (Updike 1995, 1262).[5]

Discussion

The three case studies have demonstrated how names from different layers of the past can function as a device to make the reader "participate in Rabbit's recall," as De Bellis (2000, 357) has so aptly put it. In Rabbit's world, there is still a piece of *Jan* "suspended in" Janice; her friend Peggy remains *Peggy Gring* even after marrying "that jerk Fosnacht;" and the restaurant in central Brewer that keeps taking on new names does so only on the surface, while underneath there will always be old *Johnny Frye's*.

These are just three of the most conspicuous examples of onomastic layering, to which we could easily add more. Remarried Doris Eberhardt, for instance, is an old friend of Janice's, whom Harry keeps calling by her first husband's name, *Doris Kaufmann* (1222). And there is Teresa Angstrom, Harry's daughter-in-law, whom he occasionally refers to by her maiden name, *Lubell* (1060), as though to make their later affair less "incestuous" (see Buck 1998, 162–163). Two examples with respect to Harry's own name are *Harold* and *Hassy*, both of which occasionally pop up in his mind to bring back memories from "those lost days never to be relived" (1486). But the most obvious case of layering is the persistent variation between *Harry* and *Rabbit*, which continues throughout the narrative of all four books. Even though Harry is well aware that "Nobody ever calls me Rabbit" anymore (325), he himself keeps using his old nickname until the very end of the series (see Backhaus 2020). As Moore (1998, 184) has observed, Harry clearly has "much trouble growing beyond Rabbit."

As for names of places, Harry finds it worthwhile to inform us of details such as that what he used to know as *Kegerise Alley* is now called *Kegerise Street* (1383). We also learn that the Ben Franklin, once "a proud gilded downtown hotel," by the time of *Rabbit at Rest* has become a Ramada Motor Inn (1219). And Ollie Fosnacht's former music store *Chords 'n' Records*, later revamped into *Fidelity Audio*, is now a shop for running shoes called *The Light Fantastic* (1216). Harry even notices how motels and gas stations along the road "are changing their names, Humble to Getty, Atlantic to Arco" (611).

Somewhat annoyed by her husband's preoccupation with things gone, Janice in one scene tells him point blank: "Harry, you *must* stop living in the past" (Updike 1995, 844, emphasis original). In fact, Harry's strong alignment with his younger self has been one of the major themes in the series from early on. With respect to names, one telling example is a mistake he makes while working as a linotyper in *Rabbit Redux*. Setting an article titled "Local Excavations Unearth Antiquities," he repeatedly mis-types the name of the vice-president of Brewer's Social History Society, a certain Dr. Klaus Schoerner, as "Dr. Kleist" (426–427). *Kleist* is the name of his former school principal, who occurs in a number of narrative flashbacks, including one shortly before the linotyping incident. By accidentally typesetting a piece of childhood memory into the article, it is as though Harry is excavating his very own past in this scene.

The force behind all these almost compulsive acts of recall is the "sense of accomplishment" (Miller 2001, 38) Harry experienced during his days as a

basketball prodigy. As Updike has often explained, his initial idea for *Rabbit, Run* was based on an "observation that the small city landscape I had come out of was littered with the unsuccessful later lives of heroic high-school athletes" who would peak at eighteen and were "left then really with nowhere to go but down" (1994, 194). Nostalgia is thus a foundational motif in the *Rabbit* series that "remains a key to the mind of Angstrom, and each new decade merely adds another layer to his memory" (Berryman 1998, 29). Harry himself makes this unmistakably clear in a key scene in *Rabbit, Run*, where he tells Reverend Eccles:

> I once did something right. I played first-rate basketball. I really did. And after you're first-rate at something, no matter what, it kind of takes the kick out of being second-rate. (Updike 1995, 92)

This overall attitude towards life, present and past, also goes some way to explain Harry's naming preferences. It is as though each time he uses an old name, he is invoking a piece of this former "first-rateness" that makes up such an important part of his identity. Though his life is certainly no failure (see Moore 1998), his falling back on old names can be seen as a subtle but recurrent declaration of his fondness of things as he once knew them, and his persistent unease with seeing them change.

To be fair, Harry is not the only character in the *Rabbit* series who shows an awareness of older name layers. Take Janice, who, as we learn in a passage in *Rabbit is Rich*, also keeps calling the restaurant in central Brewer *Johnny Frye's* (Updike 1995: 951). And in *Rabbit Remembered*, a large part of which is told from her point of view, Janice remembers "Peggy Fosnacht, earnest wall-eyed clumsy Peggy, who had been Peggy Gring when Janice and she were young" (Updike 2000, 340). In the same book, she even reflects on the differing meanings of *Janice* and *Jan* (203).

As these examples suggest, onomastic layering is perhaps more than just an idiosyncratic mind habit of the protagonist, but may well be a common psychological experience that makes up part of our way of remembering overall, and hence part of our identity. Updike's conspicuous attention to the phenomenon imbues his characters with just that: a memory and an identity.

Conclusion

As we have seen, Rabbit Angstrom is a character who likes to revisit the past. In his later years, he even takes some morbid pleasure in extensive car rides around his old hometown, "freshening his memory and hurting himself with the pieces of his old self that cling to almost every corner of the Brewer area" (Updike 1995, 1214). One way of tapping into these pieces of "old self" is Harry's calling of people and places the way they once were called. His habitual use of names from the past not only serves to keep the story and its characters chronologically connected, but also provides some immediate psychological insights into an almost pathological infatuation with a previous version of himself. A closer look at onomastic layering thus opens up new paths to the study of names in one major work of US American postwar literature.

Notes

1. In this scene, one of the funniest in *Rabbit is Rich*, Harry makes various attempts to tell a moderately amusing story he heard on the radio while desperately trying to recall the name of one participant's new girlfriend who keeps talking to him. He is further distracted by the sight of Cindy Murkett getting in and out of the pool in her black swimsuit (Updike 1995, 670–683). For the overall significance of this scene also see Newman (1988).

2. As Waldron (1984) has shown, the original 1960 edition of *Rabbit, Run* was meticulously revised by Updike for two subsequent editions in 1964 and 1970, respectively. In a third go, Updike "tried to smooth away such inconsistencies as have come to my attention" (Updike 1995, xxiii) when preparing the publication of *Rabbit Angstrom*. The fact that the variation of Peggy's surname has been retained suggests it is fully intended.

3. As one of Updike's many inside jokes, the name *Foster* occurs again some thirty years later, at a party both the Angstroms and the Fosnachts attend. When Ollie says that his wife wants to leave, one of the other guests tells him "You're kidding, Foster" (Updike 1995, 890).

4. Note that by the time of *Rabbit at Rest*, Kroll's Department Store has already gone out of business. It was closed "one summer," as Harry recalls in a gloomy passage towards the end of the book (Updike 1995, 1469). The use of *Kroll's* in this scene is another "dead" reference based on a name from the past (also see Keener 2005, 110–111).

5. Incidentally, in this scene Harry goes for "one of the most destructive salads" (De Bellis 2000: 179) on the menu, even though he is just recovering from a heart attack. Regarding the subsequent developments in *Rabbit at Rest*, it could even be argued that Harry's taste for unhealthy food eventually makes him follow those previously mentioned "big old-fashioned German eaters, who have eaten themselves pretty well into the grave" (Updike 1995, 699) at Johnny Frye's.

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