"No-Names" in Literature

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If we think of the progress made in mathematics as a result of the invention of the zero, a symbol for nothing, we realize on what small hinges great doors sometimes turn. The existence of a verbal symbol, such as *Nothing*, for something that does not exist, however, has served to obstruct rather than forward the course of logical thinking. Alfred Jules Ayer has called our attention to the philosophical quandary into which metaphysical thinkers such as Heidegger plunged us by assuming that *Nothing* must exist because it names something mysterious.[1] In language, *Nothing* can serve as the subject of a predication, but confusion results if it is assumed that whatever can serve as the grammatical subject of a sentence must thereby exist. In philosophy, existence is not an attribute, for attributes presuppose existence; but in language, existential propositions and attributive propositions have the same form, e.g., "Nothing exists" and "Hamlet broods." Though *Hamlet* denotes an existing person having a certain attribute of brooding, *Nothing* is either a denial of existence of anything whatever, or the proper name of a unique entity denoted by such a symbol, but not both. Because language by its grammatical structure conceals from us this crucial difference, literature is free to play with paradoxes. The proper name that embodies this kind of paradox will here be termed the "no-name."

In order to appreciate fully the paradox, however, we must acknowledge proper names to have a certain kind of meaning. Such an acknowledgement runs counter to fact, for ordinarily, names like Baker and Smith, though derived from occupations, denote persons who are not necessarily bakers or smiths. This kind of meaning is postulated by Humpty Dumpty in the reverse world of *Through the Looking-Glass*, where right becomes left and vice versa. In real life proper names denote unique entities; other words denote general,

[1] *Language, Truth and Logic* (London, 1955), pp. 42–44.

universal entities. In Humpty Dumpty's world these functions are reversed: a word means neither more nor less than what Humpty Dumpty chooses it to mean (*glory* is "a nice knockdown argument") and a proper name has general significance (*Humpty Dumpty* means "egg-shaped" and *Alice*, "any shape, almost") (ch. 6, p. 263).[2] Susanne Langer has pointed out that some primitive societies often choose names to suit connotation to the bearer, possibly naming the same man in turn *Lightfoot, Hawkeye,* and *Whizzing Death.*[3] Neither she nor Paul Ziff, who has most recently investigated the problem with thoroughness,[4] acknowledges that English regularly uses proper names to connote meaning of this kind. In literature, however, the practice is common.

One further restriction is laid upon the no-name discussed here. Varieties of it such as *Nobody* and *Nowhere* are commonly used not to describe no one and no place, but to mean a person or place of no importance. This meaning appears in *Mr. Zero* of Elmer Rice's *Adding Machine.* Mr. Zero is a cipher, *a* nobody in a mechanical system, but he is still somebody; he still exists even if the attribute of his being human has a value of zero. In "Nicholas Nobody slept here" *Time* also uses the name for a person of no importance.[5] Oppositely, persons of importance are referred to as *somebody*, or *everybody who is anybody*. In "Nobody's Story" Dickens tells a fable about the indifference of the governing classes toward common laboring people. Spokesman for the commoners is Nobody, who voices their desire for wholesome amusements, pure air, pure water, education for their children, and the like. These aspirations, however, constitute only a subject for polemics among the Bigwigs, who finally ignore the plight of the common man:

> So Nobody lived and died in the old, old, old way; and this, in the main, is the whole of Nobody's story.
>
> Had he no name, you ask? Perhaps it was Legion. It matters little what his name was. Let us call him Legion.

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[2] References are from *The Annotated Alice,* ed. Martin Gardner (New York, 1960). On p. 263, n.2, Gardner points out that this Carrollian inversion is described in Peter Alexander, "Logic and the Humor of Lewis Carroll," *Proceedings of the Leeds Philosophical Society* (May 1951) 6.551–66.

[3] *Philosophy in a New Key* (Cambridge, Mass., 1957), p. 66.

[4] *Semantic Analysis* (Ithaca, New York, 1960), pp. 93–94.

[5] "The Fourth Network," *Time*, June 29, 1962, p. 32.

> . . .The story of Nobody is the story of the rank and file of the earth. They bear their share of the battle; they have their part in the victory; they fall; they leave no name but in the mass.[6]

Dickens uses *Nobody* for this mass name. It is a name for a class rather than for one of its members, so *Legion* would have served as well to emphasize mass. The notion of *Nobody* for a person of no importance is extended to that of a class of such people. Here the discussion of the no-name will relate only to the primary meaning – the denial of existence to any such-named person or place.

One of the most familiar, if not the earliest, exploitation of the no-name occurs in the *Odyssey*. It becomes instrumental in saving Odysseus and his men from being eaten in the cave of the Cyclops. Odysseus offers the giant some wine from the Greek ship, suggesting that his own generosity may mollify the hard-heartedness of his captor. After three drinks, the Cyclops' wits are befuddled, and Odysseus begins talking:

> "'Cyclops, thou askest me my renowned name, and I will declare it unto thee, and do thou grant me a stranger's gift, as thou didst promise. Noman [Οὖτις] is my name, and Noman [Οὖτιν] they call me, my father and my mother and all my fellows.'" (9. 364–367)[7]

The Cyclops is too drunk to recognize Οὖτις as anything but a proper name, or feel the irony of his own response:

> "'Noman [Οὖτιν] will I eat last in the number of his fellows, and the others before him: that shall be thy gift.'" (9. 369–370)

Even after Polyphemus falls into a drugged sleep and Odysseus blinds him with a burning olive stake, the maddened giant persists in his confusion, unable to communicate with his fellow Cyclopes who gather outside his cave in answer to his anguished cries:

> "'Surely no mortal [μή τίς] driveth off thy flocks against thy will: surely none [μή τίς] slayeth thyself by force or craft?'"

[6] *Christmas Books: Tales and Sketches,* in *The Writings of Charles Dickens,* ed. Edwin Percy Whipple *et al.* (Boston and New York, 1894) 25.51–52.

[7] *Homer's Odyssey,* eds. W. Walter Merry and James Riddell, 2nd ed. rev. (Oxford, 1886) 1.384, n. 366: "The form Οὖτιν is intentionally made different from the ordinary accusative from οὔτις, because it is used as a proper name." Translation is from *The Odyssey of Homer,* by S. H. Butcher and A. Lang (London, 1917).

"And the strong Polyphemus spake to them again from out the cave: 'My friends, Noman [Οὖτις] is slaying me by guile, not at all by force.'

"And they answered and spake winged words: 'If then no man [μή τίς] is violently handling thee in thy solitude, it can in no wise be that thou shouldest escape the sickness sent by mighty Zeus.'" (9. 405–411)

The same pun is repeated in *The Cyclops* of Euripides.[8] Ulysses gives his name as *Nobody* (line 556) and a Chorus of Satyrs asks the Cyclops the cause of his distress:

Cyclops. 'Twas Nobody [Οὖτίς] destroyed me.
Chorus. Why then no one
Can be to blame.
Cyclops. I say 'twas Nobody [Οὖτίς]
Who blinded me.
Chorus. Why then you are not blind!
Cyclops. I wish you were as blind as I am.
Chorus. Nay,
It cannot be that no one [οὔτις] made you blind.
Cyclops. You jeer me; where, I ask, is Nobody [Οὖτις]?
Chorus. No where, O Cyclops. (lines 678–684)

In both Homer and Euripides Polyphemus interprets Οὖτις to denote the man speaking to him, and Odysseus means to deny the existence of every man in general. The paradox is not only that of both existence and non-existence, but that of one man and every man. If Polyphemus had been able to recognize that Οὖτίς was not a name, then he could not have made the additional mistake of accepting it as identifying the man speaking to him.

The same kind of nonsense is found in *Through the Looking-Glass*:

"I see nobody on the road," said Alice.

"I only wish *I* had such eyes," the King remarked in a fretful tone. "To be able to see Nobody! And at that distance too! Why, it's as much as *I* can do to see real people, by this light!"

[8] References are from the Shelley translation, *The Complete Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, eds. Roger Ingpen and Walter E. Peck, 4 (New York, 1928); for the Greek, see *Euripides*, Loeb Ed. trans. Arthur S. Way (New York, 1912), 2, lines 672–675.

> All this was lost on Alice, who was still looking intently along the road, shading her eyes with one hand. "I see somebody now!" she exclaimed at last. (ch. 7. p. 279)

Alice is using *nobody* as an indefinite pronoun, a universal negative for "no person whatever." The King is using *Nobody* for both "no person" and "a definite person." Like Odysseus, the King alone is aware of the paradox – that anything can both *be* and *not-be* at the same time – because in giving a proper name to someone who does not exist, he also asserts that the person is not real. A bit later the King tries the same literary jest on the Messenger:

> "Who did you pass on the road?" the King went on, holding out his hand to the Messenger for some more hay.
>
> "Nobody," said the Messenger.
>
> "Quite right," said the King: "this young lady saw him too. So of course Nobody walks slower than you."
>
> "I do my best," the Messenger said in a sullen tone. "I'm sure nobody walks much faster than I do!"
>
> "He can't do that," said the King, "or else he'd have been here first. However, now you've got your breath, you may tell us what's happened in the town." (ch. 7, pp. 281–282)

The Messenger's sullenness characterizes his lack of understanding. To him, *Nobody* is merely a universal negative, not a name.

In Shakespeare's time *Nobody* enjoyed some popularity as a proper name. "The Stationers' Register tells us of a license to Rowland Hall in 1561 for *a letter of Nicholas Nemo*, who was also a character in the play of *The three ladies of London*. In 1568 Singleton was licensed to print *the return of old well-spoken Nobody*. The same kind of witticism is seen in Sir Edward Dyer's *Praise of Nothing*, 1585, and in William Lisle's *Nothing for a new-year's Gift*, 1603, with its motto, 'Nihil est ex omni parte beatum.'"[9] A historically important play of this period is an anonymous satire on social and political corruption called *Nobody and Somebody*. A picture appears on the title page of the comedy showing Nobody as a man up to his neck in breeches, his arms extended from his pockets, having legs, but no body:

[9] *Nobody and Somebody*, in *The School of Shakespeare*, ed. Richard Simpson (London, 1878) 1.270. References are to this edition.

Clown. But Maister, why doe you goe thus out of fashion? you are even a very hoddy doddy, all breech.

Nobody. And no body. (lines 375–377)

Throughout the play Nobody is blamed for everything that Somebody does. Nobody is present in all the comic interludes, generally with his man, a clown, and the greater part of the humor consists of innumerable paradoxes made possible when *Nobody* is the subject of the predication, e.g., in describing himself: "I am / All spirit, *Nobody*" (lines 778–779). He tells of his conversation with a ferryman:

what's your name? quoth he;
I told him Nobody; then he bad me Welcome:
Said he would carry Nobody for nothing. (lines 1147–49)

He has a fight with Braggart:

Brag. Prepare thee, then, for I will spit thy body upon this weapon.

Nobo. Nay, by faith, that you cannot, for I have no bodye. (lines 1198–1200)

and with Somebody:

My friends, you that doe know how innocent I am,
Draw in my quarrell, succor Nobody!

What? Nobody but Nobody remaining?

Clowne. Yes Maister, I, Nobodies man.
Nobody. Stand to me nobly then, and feare them not!

Thy Maister Nobody can take no wounds.
Nobody is no coward; Nobody
Dares fight with all the world. (lines 827–834)

It is no surprise, then, to discover an allusion to *Nobody* in *The Tempest*. Stephano urges Trinculo to join him in song, but sings to the wrong tune. Present with the company is the invisible spirit Ariel, who proceeds to play the proper tune on a pipe and tabor. Astonishment follows:

Trin. This is the tune of our Catch, plaid by the picture of No-body. (III. ii. 134–135)[10]

[10] Furness, *New Variorum* [9].

The appellation is appropriate, for Ariel is made of air; he is all spirit and no body. Furness records three possible sources for an allusion: the picture prefixed to *Nobody and Somebody*; the "signe of No-body" over the shop where the play was printed; or an engraving on the ballad *Well-spoken Nobody* representing "a tatterdemalion man surrounded by broken household utensils, and bearing the motto: 'Nobody is my name that beareth everybodyes blame'" (pp. 170–171).

In a historical sense nobody in *The Tempest* is real. The play creates its own world in which not reality, but a sense of it, is reproduced. The actors of Ariel's masque melt into thin air, but are ultimately no less real than Ariel or anyone else in the play. Sometimes the no-name does show an author's intent to characterize not merely one person but his whole work as imaginary. At least three of these authors happen to be men who envisioned other brave new worlds. More, in coining the title *Utopia*, made its derivation purposely ambiguous, meaning either ὄυ τοπος, "nowhere," or ἔυ τοπος, "good place." The name is a paradox, as if to say "There is a good place and it is nowhere." More's no-name thus distinguishes between his imaginary world and the real one. The proper name *Utopia* changed from a singular term to *utopia*, a general term characterizing a literary genre. Samuel Butler in *Erewhon* and *Erewhon Revisited* and William Morris' *News from Nowhere* follow More's precedent.

Jules Verne's *Nemo* of *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea* is a name as paradoxical as the character it purports to denote. Latin for "no man," it is natural to surmise that Verne is using this proper name to indicate that his creation has no spatiotemporal referent; in short, that Nemo and his world are a fiction. Quite the reverse is true. The names of the other characters are not only plausible (Ned Land, Conseil), but historical (Captain Farragut, M. de Lesseps). Historical events and scientific fact combine in such a way as to supplant the air of fantasy with one of realism. Verne was prophetic. His intention was not to emphasize that Nemo's voyage was imaginary, but to show the enigmatic character of this tortured man. No one inside the story or out of it takes Nemo's name to be real, but by calling himself a name that lacks even the air of realism, Nemo shows he no longer recognizes society or wants it to recognize him:

> "What name am I to call you by, sir?"
>
> "Captain Nemo," answered the commander. "That is all I am to you, and you and your companions are nothing to me but the passengers of the *Nautilus*." (ch. 10, p. 61)[11]

Nemo is expressive of his break with humanity, civilization, and law, a break accompanied by an intense pride. He is "no man" because he does not choose to belong to mankind; he feels superior to men as a class, as if they were sharks. When Nemo takes possession of the South Pole, planting a flag bearing the letter "N," the letter may represent not only *Nemo*, but his true name. His passengers pun on *Nemo* as a pseudonym in their delight over the prospect of a year-long voyage under the sea: "Besides, M. Nemo, who well justifies his Latin name, is not more troublesome than if he did not exist" (ch. 20, p. 107). As *Nemo* denotes both a person who exists and every person who does not, the Captain's attributes are likewise paradoxical. Nemo is a gentleman, polite and hospitable, but without warmth enough to take the hand Aronnax holds out to him. He gloats over the death agonies of men who swarm the warship he has sunk, yet risks his life to save an unknown Indian diver. After sending the ship to the bottom, he kneels sobbing before a picture of a young woman and two children. He admires the portraits of historical figures who dedicated themselves to "one great humane idea" (ch. 32, p. 201), yet has devoted himself to hate and has made the Nautilus the instrument of his revenge. He despises all despots, but has imprisoned his own passengers for life. The solution to the paradox of his character lies in an insubmersible case that contains his life's history, but its fate, and the true name of Nemo, remain unknown.

Two no-names appear in Hawthorne's story entitled "A Select Party." A certain Man of Fancy decides to hold a party at a castle in the air and selects a group of guests who all have one thing in common – they do not exist. Among these personages are the Man of Straw, the Wandering Jew, John Doe and Richard Roe, Davy Jones, and unreal types, such as an incorruptible Patriot, a Scholar without pedantry, and a Beautiful Woman without pride or coquetry. Along the castle walls are ideal statues of the kind that ancient and modern sculptors only imperfectly succeeded in putting

[11] 20,000 *Leagues Under the Sea* (London and Glasgow, 1954).

into marble, and in the library are works that authors planned but never succeeded in performing, such as the untold tales of Chaucer's pilgrims and the conclusion of Coleridge's *Christabel.* It is the place of persons and things which have never existed except in the imagination, and this realm, where water flows from the Fountain of Youth, is named *Nowhere* (pp. 86, 88).[12]

Here the host nearly overlooks a guest standing quietly in the shadow of a pillar: "My dear sir," exclaimed the host, grasping him warmly by the hand, "allow me to greet you as the hero of the evening. Pray do not take it as an empty compliment; for if there were not another guest in my castle, it would be entirely pervaded with your presence" (p. 73). There is only one guest of a quality that would fit this compliment, though his name is not yet revealed. His reply matches the wit of the host: "I thank you," answered the unpretending stranger; "but, though you happened to overlook me, I have not just arrived. I came very early; and, with your permission shall remain after the rest of the company have retired" (pp. 73–74). Before the identity of the guest is made known, some of his nobler attributes are described. He is the only mathematician capable of squaring the circle, or mechanic knowing perpetual motion, or scientist able to make water run uphill. Naturally, he is far from being a member of good society, and is always avoided by public figures. His identity is finally revealed, but then only indirectly: "For especial reasons we are not at liberty to disclose his name, and shall mention only one other trait, – a most singular phenomenon in natural philosophy, – that, when he happens to cast his eyes upon a looking-glass, he beholds Nobody reflected there!" (p. 74).

The no-name is thus a word that purports to name but cannot, for the prefix *no* universally denies existence to the object to which it is attached. It makes possible our having *No-cake* and eating it too. The solution to this paradox lies not in language, which created it, but in logic – in recognizing that existential and attributive propositions cannot have the same form. Or we may accept a no-name as a name of a unique entity that does not exist – acceptance in name only. In either case, no-names allow creatures such as Ariel both to be *and* not to be.

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[12] References are from "A Select Party, "in *Mosses from an Old Manse, Hawthorne's Works* (New York and Boston, 1882), 2.