Names as Verbal Icons[1]

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> "And in the end, their names were only names and names — and nothing more.
> Or, if their names were something more than names . . ."
> Thomas Wolfe, *Of Time and the River.*

In a detailed discussion of the process of semantic change involved when words become names, I have suggested elsewhere[2] that names reflect at least three levels of meaning:

(a) the *lexical* level, i.e. the dictionary meaning of the word or words comprising the name;

(b) the *associative* level, i.e. the reason or reasons why the particular lexical (or onomastic) items were used in the naming process – this, incidentally, is also the level on which connotative names operate;

(c) the *onomastic* level, i.e. the meaning of a denotative name as a name, or its application based on lexical and associative semantic elements, but usually no longer dependent on them.

If this assumption of a threefold semantic tier is correct, *naming* might be paraphrased as "the process by which words become names by association." It is also worth reiterating that as part of the final stages of this process the end-product, the name,[3] frequently loses its lexical meaning and, divested of the associations which initially caused the transition from word to name, more often than not operates, from a semantic point of view, on the onomastic level alone. Consequently, while for the correct usage of a name it is necessary, indeed essential, that the user know it, it is not expected of him that he also understand it, since that would demand a survival or at least a recovery of the lexical meaning. Such a reduction to the lexical level is, however, normally uncalled for, in view of the fact that even when the word meaning of a name is accessible

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[1] This is a considerably revised version of a paper read at the Annual Meeting of the American Name Society in Chicago on December 30, 1973. It is affectionately dedicated to Margaret Bryant, not only because she did not hear the first version.

[2] "Linguistics in Place-Name Studies," in *Current Trends in Onomastics in the United States* (in preparation).

[3] Or, in Algeo's terms, "a word people use to call someone or something by." See John Algeo, *On Defining the Proper Name*, University of Florida Humanities Monographs, no. 1 (Gainesville, Florida), p. 87.

without any special effort or knowledge, it is ordinarily ignored by the name user, to the point of total unawareness; therefore the fact that Mr. Baker is a butcher does not bother anyone.

While the linguistically oriented onomastician – and practically all name scholars have so far almost by definition, but certainly by training, been linguists, and especially linguistic historians – shows a primary concern in the task of making a name lexically meaningful again, the creative writer, and particularly the poet, has gladly accepted the lexically meaningless name as a literary device of no mean possibilities. This is not to say that all writers and poets have in fact seen the creative possibilities of names in this way; indeed, many have approached and employed them rather like the linguistic historian – it did matter to them what the real or perceived lexical meanings of the names of their characters or localities were, and it is therefore quite a legitimate pursuit on the part of literary onomastics to ferret out the author's etymological intentions, as an important aspect of the literary function of names.

However, what this paper is attempting to do goes beyond such direct relationship between name etymology and quality of character or place; its concern is to be rather the deliberate poetic usage of the lexically meaningless name as a foregrounding device by the creative artist who seizes upon the onomastic item as a welcome means of enriching and condensing the texture of his work. This is true of both oral tradition and written composition, and it is therefore just as helpful to illustrate our line of argument by examples from, let us say, popular balladry[4] as from conscious art poetry, whether imitative of the ballad or not.

At its simplest, in such usage, the name – and I am obviously thinking particularly of place-names in this context – becomes a convenient localizing device, pinpointing the external or internal event of the poem:

> "The king sits in Dunfermling town / Drinking the blude-reid wine"
> (Sir Patrick Spens)
> "There lived a wife at Usher's Well, / and a wealthy wife was she"
> (The Wife of Usher's Well)
> "I have a bower at Bucklesfordberry, / full daintily it is dight"
> (Little Musgrave)
> "There dwelt a man in fair Westmoreland, / Johnie Armstrong men did him call"
> (Johnie Armstrong)
> "There lives a lad in Rhynie's lands, an' anither in Auchindore"
> (Lang Johnny More)

These randomly chosen lines from Sir Francis James Child's canon of traditional ballads,[5] can easily be matched by instances from art poetry:

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[4] "Place-Names in Traditional Ballads," *Folklore* 84 (1973), pp. 299–312.

[5] Francis James Child, *The English and Scottish Popular Ballads* (New York: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1882–1898).

"In Xanadu did Kubla Khan a pleasure dome decree"
(Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Kubla Khan*)
"All in the Downs the fleet was moored, / The streamers waving in the wind"
(John Gay, *Sweet William's Farewell to Black-eyed Susan*)
"Let Observation, with extensive view, / Survey mankind, from China to Peru"
(Samuel Johnson, *The Vanity of Human Wishes*)
"Sweet Auburn! loveliest village of the plain"
(Oliver Goldsmith, The Deserted Village)
"Ye flowery banks of bonie Doon, / How can ye blume sae fair"
(Robert Burns, *Bonie Doon*).

In calling such usage "simple," one may with justification be accused of trivialising the poet's or singer's intent and of neglecting important facets of poetic strategy. In order to answer such criticism, the quotations just listed were therefore chosen deliberately to represent various degrees of simplicity or complexity. Dunfermline, Westmoreland, Rhynie, Auchindore, and the Downs are very real and identifiable geographical locations, some of them more widely known than others, which serve the purpose of localisation and that alone. China and Peru are just as real and identifiable, but in the context of the Johnson poem are clearly not meant as actual locations but rather as limiting geographical references. Usher's Well and Bucklesfordberry sound real, and certainly are real as locations anchoring the respective ballad narratives "to the ground," so to speak, within the ballad "world," but to the best of this writer's knowledge have never been identified and might consequently just as well be termed imaginary in the same sense in which, in spite of its basis in historical reality, Xanadu might be called imaginary. Sweet Auburn and Bonnie Doon are by no means localities invented by Oliver Goldsmith and Robert Burns but the epithets added, as well as the evocative address, intimate that our two poets had obviously more in mind than a toponymic shorthand for a geographical setting, a more limited kind of poetic technique which is akin to the place-name rhyme of oral tradition.[6]

As regards lexical meaning, English-speaking readers – and these ballads and poems are, after all, in English – may recognise certain elements in such names as Usher's Well, Bucklesfordberry, Westmoreland, Auburn, and the Downs, and are likely to be aware of at least partial meanings. There is, however, no poetic significance in such partial transparence, and these names might on the whole be as semantically opaque as the others – Dunfermline, Rhynie, Auchindore, Doon, and Xanadu, China and Peru, although the opacity of the first four of these is, of course, less formidable to speakers of Celtic languages. The main point to remember is that etymologies, or attempts at etymologisation, simply do not enter into the picture.

[6] See, for example, W. F. H. Nicolaisen, "Some Gaelic Place-Rhymes," *Scottish Studies* 7 (1963), pp. 100–102.

The hints contained in Goldsmith's "Sweet Auburn" and Burns' "Bonnie Doon" are sufficient to make us realise that a name may function in a poem in more than one way, quite regardless of its etymology, real or perceived. In addition to is localising effect, it may have other qualities, notions, feelings, impressions to convey which may or may not have a direct connection with its location. Instances in the first category, i.e. in the group for which it does matter where the names are located, would be, it seems, Westmoreland, the Downs, Dunfermline, Rhynie, Auchindore, Xanadu, China and Peru which, in their own different fashions, provide the reader or listener with some of the flavor of the places so named, whether it be the peculiar scenic beauty of the English Lake District, the historical associations of the royal residence on the River Forth, the cultural landscape of the farming communities of the Scottish north-east, or the exotic appeal and otherness of places and countries far from home. Much will depend in each case on the knowledge which the reader or listener has of the places concerned. It is more than likely, for instance, that names like Dunfermline, Rhynie, and Auchindore convey very little topographic or cultural detail to most people outside Scotland or Britain, whereas their isolating onomastic burden is far greater for a Scot, especially for Dunfermline, less so for Rhynie, and least for Auchindore, although the general picture of the landscape of the north-east of Scotland still remains.

To the second category, i.e. to those names which have a secondary function not directly related to their location, would belong such names as Usher's Well, Bucklesfordberry, Auburn and Doon. For the first two examples, no location is known anyhow, and any secondary role, apart from the apparent authenticity conferred on a ballad narrative by the mention of a place-name, however unidentifiable or fictitious, will for that reason have to be deduced from internal evidence. For the name Usher's Well there is next to no information of this kind, and we must come to the conclusion that it only has a localising function, albeit a fictitious one, in the ballad.[7] For Bucklesfordberry, on the other hand, the night of love and morning of disaster for Little Musgrave and Lady Barnard (they spend the night together at Bucklesfordberry and are both killed by the irate and jealous Lord Barnard on his unexpected return in the early morning) creates a new literary meaning which one can no longer ignore or dismiss from one's mind whenever the name is mentioned. Auburn and Doon, too, although primarily this English village in Yorkshire and that Scottish river in Ayrshire, take on a new literary role as a result of the poems in which they occur so that Auburn, as "Sweet Au-

[7] In his adaptation of this traditional ballad under the title of "The Sea-Wife," Rudyard Kipling, for instance, substitutes the equally unidentifiable *Northern Gate* for *Usher's Well.*

burn, loveliest village of the plain," becomes the poetic prototype of a Deserted Village, and Doon, as "Bonnie Doon," can no longer be dissociated from false love and deceit which makes mockery of appearances. Bucklesfordberry, Auburn, and Doon carry out this their secondary function successfully, whether their location is known and appreciated or not. For those who do know the Yorkshire Auburn and/or the Ayrshire Doon, their empirical personal knowledge will allow them to appreciate the poetic works in question on an additional level which generates visual association with topographic detail. The point at issue, however, is that such knowledge is not essential for a full understanding of these poems.

There would undoubtedly be considerable justification in detecting in this latter group traces of metonymic transference of meaning, although the contrast literal versus figurative is so much more easily handled with regard to non-onomastic lexical items. When somebody says "The whole village rejoiced,"[8] it does not need much experience in the language of literature to understand the noun phrase "the whole village" as standing for "all the people in the village." When a newscaster tells us that "Washington has reacted cautiously to the latest peace proposals," most of us also realise that the place-name Washington here represents "the people in Washington who run the American government," but since Washington has no, or at best partial, lexical meaning, the literal use to which the figurative one is here contrasted must of necessity be a purely onomastic one, i.e. Washington, capital of the United States, situated at such and such a latitude and longitude, of the following size and extent, administrative status, etc., whereas the derivation of the name from that of the first President of the United States, the conversion of a personal name into a place-name, does not come into play at all. For most names there is no "literal" usage-cum-meaning in the ordinary sense. Because of the shift in the level of meaning outlined at the beginning, most names, even when accessible on the lexical level, are basically figurative in so far as their application tends to vary from orthodox language usage and introduces a measure of noticeable linguistic abnormality or even downright audacity, as when a place is given the name of "Wounded Knee."

It is against this background of onomastic "figurativeness" that we have to contrast the figurative usage of names in a literary sense, a poetic deployment which permits the writer to build a name into his general metonymic and symbolic strategies, even to the extent of metaphorical application, stimulating and encouraging the thinking in names, in onomastic images, rather than in words. The onomastic metaphor "Wounded

[8] This example and the next are used by Geoffrey N. Leech, *A Linguistic Guide to English Poetry* (London: Longmans, 1969), 148–149.

Knee," for example, turns into a literary metaphor in the last line of Stephen Vincent Benét's toponymically oriented poem "American Names," in the injunction "Bury my heart at Wounded Knee" (which, recently, moved further along the figurative route as the title of a book). In the context of Benét's poem, "Wounded Knee" becomes the culminating, ultimate, non-reducible distillation of a cultural essence. Together with "the plumed war-bonnet of Medicine Hat, Tucson and Deadwood and Lost Mule Flat" and such others as Harrisburg, Spartanburg and Painted Post, it is molded by the poet into a set of verbal icons, of pseudo-sacred images, in both sound and sense, not only foregrounding his self-confessed love for American names but also removing them irrevocably from the realm of lexicographical definition and from the normal linguistic processes of encoding and decoding.

Similarly, the opening two lines of Carl Sandburg's poem *Localities* – "Wagon Wheel Gap is a place I never saw / And Red Horse Gulch and the chutes of Cripple Creek" – in their insistence on the enumeration of quaint onomastic reminders of the romanticised life of the American frontiersman and the great move west, are an attempt at creating a particular atmosphere through metaphors that turn what are to all intents and purposes recognisable, meaningful lexical compounds into semantically denuded poetic sound symbols of American geography and popular culture.

Perhaps the strongest and most densely textured examples of what might be called the poetic prose of name worship, i.e. an iconically perceived accumulation of figurative geographical names turned metaphors, occur in Thomas Wolfe's epic *Of Time and the River*. Having in an earlier passage put into words his conviction as to the identity of name and place, at least in a French setting ("... what name could more perfectly express Arles than the name it has – it gives you the whole place, its life, its people, its peculiar fragrance ...")[9], the author extols in several ecstatic paragraphs "the thunder of imperial names, the names of men and battles, the names of places and great rivers, the mighty names of the States."[10] Battles, states, Indian nations, railroads, engineers, engines, sleeping-cars, tramps are pressed into service, savored, proudly offered to tongue and ear and mind as thundering hymns of worship and intoxicating songs of patriotism in onomastic garb; and all are just a preparation, a prologue for the concluding hydronymic extravaganza, echoing the main theme of the book[11]:

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[9] Thomas Wolfe, *Of Time and the River* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1935), p. 698.

[10] *Ibid.*, p. 866.

[11] *Ibid.*, p. 867.

> Finally, the names of the great rivers that are flowing in the darkness (Sweet Thames, flow gently till I end my song). By the waters of life, by time, by time: the names of the great mouths, the mighty maws, the vast, wet, coiling, never-glutted and unending snakes that drink the continent. Where, sons of men, and in what other land will you find others like them, and where can you match the mighty music of their names. – The Monongahela, the Colorado, the Rio Grande, the Columbia, the Tennessee, the Hudson (Sweet Thames!); the Kennebec, the Rappahannock, the Delaware, the Penobscot, the Wabash, the Chesapeake, the Swannanoa, the Indian River, the Niagara (Sweet Afton!); the Saint Lawrence, the Susquehanna, the Tombigbee, the Nantahala, the French Broad, the Chattahoochee, the Arizona, and the Potomac (Father Tiber!) – these are a few of their princely names, these are a few of their great, proud, glittering names, fit for the immense and lonely land that they inhabit.

No historical dilutions or delusions here, no search for origins, just locations and sounds, sounds, sounds – to use the author's epithets "princely, great, proud, glittering" sounds, a "mighty music ... fit for the immense and lonely land." A poetic illusion, perhaps; a linguistic distortion, possibly; a perpetuation of a myth, probably; an aesthetic pleasure, certainly – but also a feast (or is it a surfeit?) of names as metaphors, and a delight for the onomastic iconographers – us.

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