

Magic Names: Onomastics in the Fantasies of Ursula Le Guin

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Names in literature have long been studied. Literary onomastics is, indeed, one of the major branches of name study. If any proof of that fact is needed, one need only look at the program of the 1981 annual meeting of the American Name Society, in which two-fifths of the papers were devoted to names in literature, or to the annual Conference on Literary Onomastics and *Literary Onomastics Studies* arranged by Grace Alvarez-Altman, or to *The Study of Names in Literature: A Bibliography*, by Elizabeth M. Rajec.

Most literary onomastic studies have been devoted to charactonyms. The term *charactonym* seems not to be entered in any general dictionary so far, although it has been current among students of names for some time. It was apparently invented by Thomas Elliott Berry, who proposed the term in a note in *Word Study* in 1949. Kelsie Harder helped to popularize it with his study of Faulkner's novels. It has since been much used; half a dozen items in the Rajec bibliography have *charactonym* in their titles, and doubtless a good many others do in their texts. Berry defined the term simply as a "trait name," that is, a name somehow appropriate to a character. My impression is that it is usually pronounced with first-syllable stress, although I heard it given stress on the second syllable in a paper read at the American Dialect Society's annual meeting in 1973. It is sometimes spelt *characternym* and has such synonyms as *label name*, *attributive name*, and *characterizing name*.

Although there have been many studies of particular charactonyms in various works of literature, the charactonym itself has not received much attention. That is, the theory of literary naming has been relatively neglected. (There have been studies by Gerus-Tarnawecky, Nicolaisen, and Rudnyćkyj, among others.) Yet how an author invents appropriate names is worth more attention than it has received. The ways of name making are manifold; there are too many possibilities to cover easily, so here the focus is on just two extreme kinds of charactonyms, extreme in terms of

how the name is suitable to the character. The two kinds of name are illustrated from two novels by Ursula K. Le Guin: *The Lathe of Heaven* and *A Wizard of Earthsea*.

Ursula K. Le Guin is one of the most accomplished contemporary writers of both fantasy and science fiction, two literary genres that are alike in being nonmainstream fiction but are in some ways quite distinct from each other. Science fiction is usually set in a high-tech, futuristic version of the world we know, but modified in some significant way. Science fiction is a literary gedanken experiment, in which the author asks what the world would be like if it were different in certain specific but more or less probable ways from the ordinary world of tea and toast. Fantasy, on the other hand, usually has a low-tech, medieval setting that is clearly no simple variation on the earth we know; it is a secondary creation (to use J. R. R. Tolkien's useful term) which is inhabited by legendary creatures like dragons and in which magic works about as well as computer-programming does among us. The use of names in science fiction has been investigated, for example, by Robert Plank and John R. Krueger; names in fantasy writing have been less studied, although J. R. R. Tolkien's names have received attention, for example, by Ruth S. Noel and John Tinkler.

Le Guin's novels have a strong anthropological flavor about them—a fact that is hardly surprising since she is the daughter of Alfred and Theodora Kroeber, who were eminent in anthropology and linguistics. Le Guin's science fiction is set in worlds whose most interesting differences from ours are not their technology but the way their human societies have adapted to the environment. For example, in *The Left Hand of Darkness* a race of androgynous humanity lives on a planet that is in the middle of an ice age, and the novel is concerned chiefly with how such differences of sex and climate affect behavior. Le Guin's best fantasy is placed in the world of *Earthsea*, where there are no continents but many small islands set in the midst of a limitless ocean. On these islands magicians are as common as mackerels are in the sea. How would people act in a world of sea and spells and an occasional dragon? That is the theme of the *Earthsea* tales. As worlds and lives differ, so do names. And to illustrate the point of this essay, the naming techniques Le Guin has used in her science fiction show some significant differences from those in her fantasy. (The only earlier study of Le Guin's naming practices I know is Walter E. Meyer's careful examination of the canonical form of names in one of her science-fiction works.)

The Lathe of Heaven is a good example of one kind of naming technique. It is a science-fiction novel set in the year 2002 in Seattle, Wash-

ington. The two principal characters are George Orr and William Haber. George is a dreamer, a passive sort of chap who discovers that from time to time he has a powerful dream (an “effective dream” he calls it) that changes reality. When George wakes up, whatever he has dreamed then exists in reality and has, as far as everyone other than George himself knows, always existed. Nobody else is aware that the nature of reality shifts with George’s dreams—nobody, that is, except Haber. Haber is a second-rate psychologist to whom George has been mandatorily referred for violating the limits on drug use (in an effort to stop himself from dreaming). Haber induces hypnotic sleep in George, and, being present when one of the effective dreams occurs, realizes what those dreams do to the world. Haber then sets about, through hypnotic suggestion, to control George’s dreams and thus to remold the world nearer to his own desires. Unfortunately dreams are controlled by the subconscious, which takes suggestions but twists their interpretations. So things often turn out other than Haber intends.

The names of these two characters mirror their personalities closely and transparently. George Orr is uncertain, diffident, a born victim because he is trusting and essentially good-natured. Under his plodding and simple exterior he has, however, a depth of strength and integrity and courage. He is a perfectly balanced and adaptable individual who accepts whatever comes to him because he is centered and whole. William Haber, by contrast, is assertive, exploitative, and ego-centric. He has a messiah complex, being a do-gooder who is so intent on improving the world according to his own vision of what is desirable that he is unable to recognize the disaster he is creating. As George is passive and yin-like, Haber is active and yang-like. George is a poetic dreamer who changes the world without trying or wanting to. Haber is a social scientist—a schemer who plots to improve the world—and, as Mencken observed, “When A annoys or injures B on the pretense of improving B, A is a scoundrel.”

George, from the Greek, is etymologically ‘farmer,’ one connected with *Gea*, mother earth. So George is earthy in his simplicity, and he causes things to grow—new worlds raised into the light of reality from the dark subterranean loam of his subconscious dreams. His given name is etymologically appropriate, involving a pun that is integral with the history of the word. It is organically suited to him.

George’s last name, *Orr*, is perhaps a double pun. First and most certain, it puns on the conjunction *or*. Because he appears indecisive, one character refers to him as “Mr. Either Orr.” Being perfectly balanced between extremes, he measures in the middle on all psychological tests, a

fact that Haber comments on: "If you put . . . all [your scores] onto the same graph you sit smack in the middle at 50. Dominance, for example; I think you were 48.8 on that. Neither dominant nor submissive. Independence/dependence—same thing. . . . Both, neither. Either, or" (pp. 133–34).

The other possible pun on George's last name is *ore*. His mind is the raw stuff out of which new realities are fashioned: "He could be born into any world. He had no character. He was a lump of clay, a block of uncarved wood," or, we might say, a piece of ore (p. 127).

Another significance of George's name is suggested by the fact that the United States of the novel underwent a revolution in which the constitution was rewritten setting up a police state. The year of that event was 1984 (p. 104). Thus George Orr is an unwell George Orwell.

Haber's names are appropriate in the same way, though less striking in their associations. His given name, *William*, suggests his willfulness. In a moment of ecstatic anticipation Haber exults: "We're on the brink of discovering and controlling, for the good of all mankind, a whole new force, an entire new field of antientropic energy, of the life-force, of the will to act, to do, to change!" (pp. 135–36). *William* is acrostically "I am will," and the assertion of his self-will is Haber's dominant characteristic. His last name suggests Latin *habere* or German *haben*, both with the sense 'have, possess, hold.' In his name, William Haber thus says, I am the will to have, to control, to dominate.

It is easy to see why Le Guin chose the names of the two principal characters in this story. They are traditional characterizing names, with transparent motivations. Their associations are public. They involve puns that are etymological or that anyone can recognize and a literary allusion to a well-known novel. The names fairly invite the reader to interpret them.

A Wizard of Earthsea is a different sort of novel in several respects, including the sort of name its characters have. Its neverland setting is an archipelago in the midst of the great ocean. As in all high fantasy, magic plays a role. There is magic of all kinds, ranging from simple slight of hand to true magic—which is the control of reality by the use of names. Every person has first a child name, given by one's mother. Then one has a use name, a kind of nickname alluding to appearance or behavior, which name may be different in different localities, as one's appearance or behavior changes from time to time or from place to place. And finally one has a true name, which is a secret, told only to one's closest and most trusted friends. To know the true name of any person or of any thing is to have power over that person or thing.

The protagonist of the novel begins life with the child name *Duny*. He has as a use name *Sparrowhawk*, because he has learned to call that bird from the sky and to control it. His true name, however, is *Ged*. It was given (or perhaps more accurately, revealed) to him by the wizard Ogion when the boy came of age. The high wizards of the Island of Roke (where there is a kind of Advanced Institute for Magic and Naming) are the only ones who know the true names of all things.

The novel is a Bildungsroman. Le Guin herself has said that its theme is “coming of age,” a process foreshadowed by the change of name that the protagonist undergoes in his passage through the rites of manhood. The story is about the integration of the self (in Jungian terms), as Ged in an act of youthful bravado raises a shadowy specter that he cannot control but that he must eventually meet and become reconciled with. Ged gains power over the shadow and exorcizes it only by discovering its true name, at the climax of the novel. The names of other characters in the story are *Nemmerle*, the archmage of Roke; *Vetch*, Ged’s best friend; and *Serret*, an anima figure with whom Ged must contend. These names are typical of those in the trilogy of Earthsea books and are in striking contrast with the names Le Guin gave her characters in *The Lathe of Heaven*. Whatever associations these names have, they are not public but private and unavailable to the general reader.

Le Guin herself has commented on how she arrived at the names in this novel (“Dreams Must Explain Themselves,” pp. 49–50):

I did not deliberately invent Earthsea. I did not think “Hey wow—islands are archetypes and archipelagos are superarchetypes and let’s build us an archipelago!” I am not an engineer, but an explorer. I discovered Earthsea.

More specifically, she has said (p. 51):

Three small islands are named for my children, their baby-names; one gets a little jovial and irresponsible, given the freedom to create a world out of nothing at all. (Power corrupts.) None of the other names “means” anything that I know of, though their sound is more or less meaningful to me.

The last sentence is a significant observation. There is no reason to doubt Le Guin when she tells us that for her the only meaning of most of the magical names of her fantasy novel is a product of their sound. Such meaning is not cognitive sense at all, but incantational, mantric meaning. It has more in common with sound symbolism or the phonestheme than with semantic features. Le Guin goes on (pp. 51–53):

People often ask how I think of names in fantasies, and again I have to answer that I find them, that I hear them. This is an important subject in this

context. From that first story on, *naming* has been the essence of the art-magic as practiced in Earthsea. For me, as for the wizards, to know the name of an island or a character is to know the island or the person. Usually the name comes of itself, but sometimes one must be very careful: as I was with the protagonist, whose true name is Ged. I worked (in collaboration with a wizard named Ogion) for a long time trying to “listen for” his name, and making certain it really was his name. This all sounds very mystical and indeed there are aspects of it I do not understand, but it is a pragmatic business too, since if the name had been wrong the character would have been wrong—misbegotten, misunderstood.

A man who read the ms. for Parnassus thought “Ged” was meant to suggest “God.” That shook me badly. I considered changing the name in case there were other such ingenious minds waiting to pounce. But I couldn’t do so. The fellow’s name was Ged and no two ways about it. . . .

I said that to know the true name is to know the thing, for me, and for the wizards. This implies a good deal about the “meaning” of the trilogy, and about me. The trilogy is, in one aspect, about the artist. The artist as magician. The Trickster. Prospero. . . .

Wizardry is artistry. The trilogy is then, in this sense, about art, the creative experience, the creative process. There is always this circularity in fantasy. The snake devours its own tail. Dreams must explain themselves.

After such comments, it would be worse than presumptuous to “explain” the names in *A Wizard of Earthsea*. Names, like dreams, must explain themselves. And, in fact, there is no other “explanation” for such magic names—in the sense that we can explain the names in, for example, *The Lathe of Heaven*. Ged is not so called because he is to remind us of “God” or of anyone or anything else. Ged is Ged. That’s what he’s called. Yet the name is not arbitrary—it is exactly right and he could not be called anything else. As Le Guin has said, his name is Ged, and no two ways about it. Names in fantasy are private to the writer and to the reader. Their meaning depends on their sound. At some nondiscursive level of knowing, readers of *A Wizard of Earthsea* know that Ged is the true name of the character—it fits.

There is an anecdote in Zen Buddhism that is relevant here. Zen is a form of Buddhism especially concerned with a direct and immediate experience of reality. Zen Buddhism, like Le Guin’s naming of her fantasy characters, is a pragmatic business. Its ideal is to see into the heart of things, into the essential nature of human experience. The anecdote is this: Before I studied Zen, mountains were mountains and rivers were rivers. While I was studying Zen, mountains came to mean far more than just mountains and rivers far more than just rivers. When I had completed my study of Zen, mountains were mountains and rivers were rivers.

To read literature without paying attention to the significance of the characters' names is to approach the literature in a pre-Zen state. George Orr is George Orr, and Ged is Ged. To see the significance in some charactonyms—for example, those in *The Lathe of Heaven*—is to approach them in a mid-Zen state. George Orr means far more than just George Orr. But to grasp the significance of other charactonyms—for example, the magical names of Earthsea—is to understand those names in a full-Zen state. Ged is Ged.

Names like *George Orr* that invite a mid-Zen approach give the onomastologist a lot to talk about. And so they have been very popular with students of literary onomastics. Names like Ged that require a full-Zen approach don't leave much room for discussion, and so they have been overlooked. But I suspect that a good many writers are like Ursula Le Guin when she writes her fantasies—the names they give characters are long thought on, carefully considered, exactly right—but are not susceptible to clever analysis. They are magical names, and can be appreciated only with a sense of the magical, the fitness of name to thing.

The two types of charactonym exemplified in these books by Ursula Le Guin are extremes in what is surely a continuum of literary names. An in-between point in that continuum is the place-name in her short story "The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas" (whose relevance was kindly brought to my attention by C. A. Hilgartner). The story is about the city of Omelas, where everyone is perfectly, utopianly happy—everyone, that is, except one wretched child who is kept in solitary confinement, in pain, filth, and torment. The well-being of the joyous citizens of Omelas depends on the continual misery of that one lost soul. Most of the citizens accept the fact that their happiness unfortunately depends on the suffering of another. But a few, when they learn the basis for their town's prosperity, renounce the comfort bought at such an expense, even though it is the expense of a single scapegoat, and go into the hardship and danger of voluntary exile. They are the ones who walk away from Omelas.

In an introduction to the story (p. 276), Le Guin says that the idea for it came to her from a passage in William James, although it also appears in Dostoyevsky's *Brothers Karamazov*, a fact she had forgotten when she wrote the story:

Of course I didn't read James and sit down and say, Now I'll write a story about that "lost soul." It seldom works that simply. I sat down and started a story, just because I felt like it, with nothing but the word "Omelas" in mind. It came from a road sign: Salem (Oregon) backwards. Don't you read road signs backwards? POTS. WOLS nerdlihc. Ocsicnarf Nas . . . Salem equals schelomo equals salaam equals Peace. Melas. O

melas. Omelas. Homme hélas. “Where *do* you get your ideas from, Ms Le Guin?” From forgetting Dostoyevsky and reading road signs backwards, naturally. Where else?

Omelas is a magic name, sort of. It would take a rare reader to make the associations that Le Guin has shown the name has for her. *Salem* means ‘peace’ though in Salem, Massachusetts, they burnt women for witchcraft. It is cognate with Arabic *salaam*, a greeting, though in the story the brave characters bid farewell to their Omelas, which is *Salem O.* reversed, a town whose peace is based on the oppression of one person and which therefore is rejected by those with conscience. *Melas* is Greek for ‘black’—the dark shade hidden beneath the brightness of Omelas. *Omelas* is homophonous with *homme hélas* ‘man, alas!’ It takes a considerable ingenuity, perhaps even for Le Guin, to arrive at such interpretations of the name. It is likely that she began with the sound and only later realized its semantic potential. It is thus a partly magic and partly transparent name, a kind of opaque charactonym. These two sorts of literary names—the magical and the transparent—are not discrete categories, but directions on a continuous scale. *Omelas* is somewhere in the middle. Yet the distinction between the two extreme types of charactonym should be clear.

It is sometimes said that we can recognize three stages of scholarship. In the first, we gather information. In the second, we classify and categorize the data gathered, looking for patterns in it. In the third, we seek for general rules and causes, explanations of the patterns that we can use as a basis for predicting future data. Onomastics has generally been in the first of those stages; and a useful, necessary stage it is. Serious work in the third stage is a long way off, if indeed it is even possible for a discipline like onomastics, which is clearly *geisteswissenschaftlich*, not *naturwissenschaftlich*. However, the second stage is possible for onomastics right now. And as we gather our data, we should attempt to find the patterns in it. The present essay is meant as a very small step in that direction. It tries to respond in a modest way to the challenge in W. F. H. Nicolaisen’s keynote address at the ninth Literary Onomastics Studies conference, a challenge that all students of names in literature should do their best to meet.

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