Introduction

What is it we call a proper name? and how do proper names differ from common nouns? Such questions have long been wrangled over by philosophers. Some of them consider proper names meaningless, crediting them with unique specificity of reference, so that "Napoleon's barber" denotes one man only—as if there were only one Napoleon and he never changed his barber. And how are we to reconcile uniqueness with the thousand George Washingtons in the USA? The comparative uniqueness of proper names goes with the untranslatability W. H. Auden draws attention to.[1] Other philosophers regard names as condensed descriptions, the most meaningful of nouns.[2] Can one even be sure that proper names are a "subdivision" or "subset of language", as Laurie Maguire assumes?[3] Her view becomes problematic when one reflects that any proper name can become a common noun ("a Judas", "a Hitler"), and conversely that all words—grammatical words as well as nouns—can be names. The Who perhaps thought it would be original to call themselves after a relative pronoun; but grammatical words have often been used as names: for example From, Thus, How, and And.[4] Paul Ziff tries to get out of these thickets by saying that proper names ordinarily are not part of language at all, and so escape grammatical and linguistic constraints.[5] But Ziff's extreme measure is unnecessary. One need only be aware of the confusion that easily arises from the ambiguity in Latin *nomen* ("name", "noun"), particularly among writers like Thomas Sprat, who identified names with words and paired words with things.[6]

The question whether names are meaningful received a classic statement in Plato's *Cratylus*. This seminal but often misunderstood

dialogue opposes the onomastic theories of the stylist Hermogenes and the Heraclitean philosopher Cratylus. Hermogenes argues that names are arbitrarily assigned; Cratylus thinks them natural and meaningful. Socrates, represented as more of a linguist than either, speaks of names as correct "at the time of utterance". He overthrows both their positions; which should discourage any simple contrast. But this conclusion has seldom been drawn: the un-Platonic dichotomy is too convenient. And many suppose the so-called "essentialists" of the early modern period preferred Cratylus' view (wrongly identified with Socrates').[7] Nevertheless, Anne Barton has shown the usefulness of the terms Cratylic and Hermogenean. They serve as clear labels for contrasting sorts of name: the ordinary, meaningless name and the meaningful, often moral, name, as in Morality plays.[8] "Magnificence" is a Cratylic name, "Kermode" is Hermogenean. Thomas Docherty holds that significant names restrict the freedom of fiction by determining character development.[9] But the wide variation in names' explicitness and plausibility makes this thesis highly debatable.

Useful as the terms have proved to be, they are not without difficulties. A name may, for example, be hard to place within either category exclusively. After all, every word in literature is supposed to be in some sense apt and meaningful. Not that all literary names need be explicit charactonyms: they can be meaningful in different ways. When Humpty-Dumpty demands what Alice's name means, she wonders "*must* a name mean something?" "Of course it must," says Humpty positively: "my name means the shape I am—and a good handsome shape it is, too. With a name like yours, you might be any shape, almost."[10] "Humpty-Dumpty" was then still descriptive of "a short, dumpy, hump-shouldered person".[11] Alice recognizes Humpty at sight because she has just recited the riddling nursery rhyme and knows, or thinks she knows, the answer is an egg.[12] Lewis Carroll, that is, C. L. Dodgson the mathematical logician (two names for two distinct identities), knew that names cannot easily be categorized as meaningful or meaningless. "Alice" and "Humpty-Dumpty" had their histories and meant different things at different times.

As we shall see, Victorian writers knew that names like Alice formerly had meanings. Besides, the most Hermogenean of names may have allusive potential. The original meaning of "Hitler" has become obscure; yet a writer could hardly name a character "Hitler" without intending an allusive type-name. Allusion being a relatively recent

device in vernacular literatures, early discussions of naming overlooked it. But when Sir Philip Sidney writes of "the Terentian Gnatho and our Chaucer's Pandar so expressed [represented] that we now use their names to signify their trades", he shows some awareness of how proper names can become allusive common names.[13] More recently, Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889–1951) in his attempt to purify the language of the philosophical tribe, subjected naming to determined analysis. But he was not much aware of the historical entanglement of names, the "complex human circumstances under which the naming of persons becomes charged with meaning and power".[14] As Frank Kermode notes, "names can have power, but not always",[15] citing *Tempest* 1.1: "What cares these roarers for the name of king?" and *Coriolanus* 5.6.100, where Coriolanus is disallowed the name Martius. Every word, to some degree, retains associations, both individual and communal, which give it meaning. Possessed as he was by his quest for the chimeric, fundamental particle of reference—the irreducible name—Wittgenstein did not see that associations are ineradicable. A word's sense, even its sound, adheres to it, whatever its referential function.

Philosophers innocent of linguistics tend in their discourse to rely implicitly on the generalizing present tense. Doing so simplifies many philosophical problems wonderfully. It took an Egyptologist, Sir Alan Gardiner (1879–1963), to detect the error of this synchronic approach. Gardiner thought it deplorable that logicians should say "here the word *smith* . . . is used as a proper name . . . as if the name 'Smith' were a fortuitous momentary application, and had not belonged to its owner from the very day of his birth"—or, to put it a little more exactly, from the registration of his birth.[16] Few philosophers have joined Saul Kripke in discussing how names are arrived at; and fewer still consider how they change with context. Kripke shows flaws in the simple cluster-of-descriptions theory of names. How, for example, are ambiguous references to be explained? (Is "Cicero" a Roman orator or a German spy?).[17] But even Kripke cannot be said to explore the temporal dimension very far. Every name changes its meaning over time. The ambiguity of "Cicero" did not antedate World War II. Nicknames are particularly mutable. As a medical student I was called Slasher; but few call me that now. Much depends on historical context: "Kevin", the name of a seventh-century saint of noble Leinster ancestry, became a 1980s type-name for a flashy, lower-class youth. In discussing names, diachronic factors always need to be kept in mind.

Fictional names

In real life, first names are usually chosen by parents or godparents or—in the case of some nineteenth-century servants—imposed by employers. Births are by statute registered by name at a Registry, and the Registrar may disallow the proposed given name if it seems outrageously foolish or cruel. Surnames, however, are in Britain part of the inheritance of a child, who bears the name passed on from paternal ancestors, either directly or according to a patronymic rule. But names in literature are not inherited like this: a fictional character's name must be found or invented—if, that is, the character is to be named at all. The novelist Joyce Cary once told Wallace Robson he thought it a good working rule that characters should not be named unless they play a part in the story.

This is a point of some importance: many writers find it impossibly difficult to select the right name for a character. For the "true name" must perfectly suit a character who as yet does not fully, or even definitely, exist. To arrive at this right name the writer must relinquish shadowy alternatives—between which there has up till now been secret hesitation—and must embrace one, newly definite, character. Naming a fictional character thus calls for more knowledge than the writer had when earlier, vaguer drafts were sketched. Yet many writers cannot get started until they have names, however provisional these may be. Kingsley Amis agonized over using "Margaret" (Philip Larkin's friend's name) in *Lucky Jim*.[18] He seems to have wanted a real name with associations he knew. J. R. R. Tolkien had similar difficulties with *The Hobbit*; at one stage Bilbo Baggins ran a serious risk of being called "Bingo". It is understandable, then, that a character's name may need to be changed. Often such changes are put down to oversight; but they may be the result of deliberate decisions.[19] George Bernard Shaw seems to have had an unusual writing practice, in that he drafted dialogue for anonymous characters.[20]

To overcome such difficulties, many writers select names from some sort of real-life list. Shakespeare drew on William Camden's essays on names in *Remains*; Henry Fielding used a subscription list; Henry James collected names from *The Times* newspaper for future use; Émile Zola studied the *Paris Directory*; and Irvine Welsh gets his names from the Edinburgh phonebook.[21] Charles Dickens has been imagined finding

names by chance on posters or vehicles. In fact, as we shall see, he too kept lists of possible names, with many alternatives for the same character.[22] Such lists sometimes merit more attention than they have usually received from critics.

Another route a writer may follow is to take over a name already selected by an earlier writer. Again, this possibility has not apparently been much explored. Yet it is probably commoner and more significant than we realize, if only because the name then comes trailing clouds of associations, good or bad, from previous literary incumbents. In short, it may be an allusive name. Think how often romance heroes have been called Arthur, or Gawain. Samuel Butler's Hudibras alludes to Spenser's unwise Hudibras in *The Faerie Queene*, who in turn alludes to the legendary king in Geoffrey of Monmouth. Similarly, Soames in Galsworthy's *Forsyte Saga* may be named after the business manager of Trollope's Lord Lufton.

A sort of literary name almost invariably allusive is the mythological. The names of deities in particular already had rich implications in classical times, and were among the first to acquire a similar potency of reference in vernacular literature. They will require separate treatment in discussing literary periods when mythology tended for one reason or another to be taken seriously, as for example with Spenser and Shakespeare. In the Middle Ages, when pagan mythology had to be accommodated through moral or spiritual allegory, the names of deities often served as moral type-names. The Renaissance mythographers still laboured to discover philosophical significances in the pagan gods. Thus Natale Conti (c. 1520–82) divides his explanations under the heads *historice*, *physice*, *ethice*, and the like: euhemeristic, scientific, and moral.[23] In popular handbooks these meanings could become starkly simple: in *Parnassus Illustratus* Diana is said to be "the goddess of hunting and virginity; and she is the moon". Julius Caesar Scaliger's *Poetice* (1561) distinguishes two kinds of *numina*: one group of powers divine and the other expressing internal experience.[24]

The habit of finding moral meanings in all sorts of names led to their being regarded as ideals of behaviour, especially for the bearer of the name. One's name was to be lived up to, and valued because embodying reputation: it might therefore be of ultimate importance. According to Joseph Addison, "every honest Man sets as high a Value upon a good Name, as upon Life it self".[25] In an early essay Robert Louis Stevenson focuses on the formative effect of a person's name,

which "makes itself felt from the very cradle". Such views on what is sometimes called nominative determinism have been statistically validated: study of American dental rolls, for example, show a significant correlation between men called Dennis and men becoming dentists.

Stevenson remembers the pride "with which [he] hailed Robin Hood, Robert Bruce, and Robert le Diable as [...] name-fellows", and considers those who have triumphed over the dire influence of unfortunately anticlimactic names such as William Shakespeare Cockerill and John Milton Hengler.[26] Notable among these is Dante Gabriel Rossetti, who "dared to translate from his mighty name-father".[27] Stevenson leaves conspicuously unmentioned here the heavy burden of the name of a famous family of engineers on someone with no vocation for engineering. Dickens seems to have been oblivious to such considerations: he named most of his sons (not, significantly, his daughters) after writers who were his friends or heroes. He called his first son Charles, after himself; his second, Walter Landor after Walter Savage Landor; his third, Francis Jeffery after the "critic laureate"; his fourth, Alfred D'Orsay Tennyson; his fifth, Sydney Smith Haldimand; his sixth, Henry Fielding; and his seventh, Edward Bulwer Lytton ("Plorn").

Because literature is by definition reread, names from literature are invariably familiar, or potentially familiar, and have a content of associations, resembling in this London names for anyone who has visited the places denoted. Peter Lamarque and Stein Olsen make the interesting point that names in fiction can never be purely denotative, since they cannot be replaced by another formulation of equal truth-value.[28] The London in a story is not all London, but only certain aspects of it selected by the author. And one might add that for similar reasons this applies also to mythological names. A mythological name in a literary work does not imply all that the name can mean.

Written names

When proper names came to be written down, they often presented special difficulties of spelling. Except for biblical and classical names, texts or reference books could not be relied on for authoritative precedents. While the culture was still oral, or largely oral, names were given whatever spelling seemed best to represent their sound. In Chaucer, Arcturus appears also as Arcture and Arctour; Semiramis might be Semyram,

Semyrame, Semyramis, or Semyramus.[29] With printed Bibles, and printed lists of names such as those in William Camden's *Remains* (1605), standardization gradually advanced; but at first printers' arbitrary spellings increased the chaos.[30] Surnames in particular continued to give trouble, as we shall see in chapter 3. The diarist Samuel Pepys (1633–1703) still often spelt surnames as he heard them, putting "Martin" for Merton; "Kerneguy" for Carnegie; "Dancre" for Danckerts; "Harlow" for Harley; "Chevins" for Chaffinch; and "Hogsden" for Hoxton. Indeed, he wrote his own name in shorthand as *Peps*, indicating a monosyllable that might be pronounced *Peeps*, *Peps*, or *Payps*. But he also wrote it in a book, in Greek letters, spelling it Πῆπυς; so he probably pronounced it *Peeps*.[31] In *No Bed for Bacon*, Caryl Brahms and S. J. Simon make a running joke of the problem, picturing Shakespeare as hopelessly undecided how to spell his own name. Their Shakespeare tries out *Shakesper, Shakspere*, and *Shekspar*, *Shakspaw*, and *Shakeshpeare*. "He crossed out *Shakespere* and wrote *Shakspur*"; "*Shakespur Shakspire Shikspar*. He crossed them out. *Shacspore* he wrote."[32] In real life Shakespeare probably did not use many variants of his name.[33] But Anne Hathaway was registered as Anna Hatherrewaye. And Queen Elizabeth herself misspelled Leicester's name "Leycesterre". English spelling was relatively fluid during the Renaissance compared with that of the Romance languages, where Latin orthography was more often a reliable guide. The possibilities for ludic variation were endless, foreshadowing the freedoms taken in *Finnegans Wake*.

Proper names have continued to present orthographic problems. How, for example, are foreign and classical names to be translated? Elizabethan authors boldly anglicized, as even George Chapman did, writing *Biron* as "Byron". By comparison Victorian writers tried to be more consistent and more correct. Thomas de Quincey (1785–1859) thundered against Walter Savage Landor (1775–1864) for his method of anglicizing classical names: "he insists on our saying—not *Heracleidae* and *Pelopidae*, as we all used to do,—but *Heracleids* and *Pelopides*".[34] But Landor's worst "caprice" showed in his treatment of Greek names:

> *Nous autres* say "Aristotle", and are quite content with it until we migrate into some extra-superfine world; but this title will not do for *him*: "Aristoteles" it must be. And why so? Because, answers the Landor, if once I consent to say Aristotle, then I am pledged to go the whole hog; and perhaps the next man I meet is Empedocles,—whom in that case, I must call Empedocle. Well, do so. *Call* him Empedocle; it will not break his back, which seems broad enough. But, now, mark the contradictions in which Mr Landor is soon landed. He

says, as everybody says, Terence and not Terentius; Horace and not Horatius; but he must leave off such horrid practices, because he dare not call Lucretius by the analogous name of Lucrece, since that would be putting a she instead of a he; nor Propertius by the name of Properce, because *that* would be speaking French instead of English.

In the face of custom and history, both writers were pursuing an impossible ideal of consistency.

Sometimes the problem resolves itself into one of relative authority. As Walter de la Mare notes, Lewis Carroll "was so little known to the public in his later years that a 'special correspondent' in Oxford spelt his name *Dogson* throughout an obituary article which appeared in a leading London newspaper".[35] It would not have been difficult for an Oxford correspondent to discover the correct spelling. More recently, reference books such as *Who's Who* has made spelling of personal names much easier. But journalists, thinking they have no time to consult these, and imagining websites will be quicker, still often spell names wrongly. My own name, for example, more often than not appears misspelled.

This is not a theoretical book, although occasionally it touches on philosophy or narratology. For a more abstract treatment of names, readers may be referred to such works as Willy Van Langedonck's *Theory and Typology of Proper Names* (2008).

Historical changes in naming customs and in the function of naming in literature have determined the arrangement of this book. Chapters 1 and 2 survey the history of real-life names and the function of names in various literary genres. Chapters 3, 5, and 6 are more detailed case studies of Spenser, Shakespeare, and Milton. Chapter 4 surveys the history of hidden names, an important feature of much pre-Enlightenment literature. Chapter 7 treats temporary names such as nicknames and servant names. Chapter 8 focuses on how Thackeray and Dickens varied the naming of characters. Arrays—ordered groups of names from Homer to Pope—are the subject of chapter 9. Finally, chapter 10 studies Joyce and Nabokov, perhaps the two most eminent namers in our literature.[36]

Notes

1. Auden 1971: 267.
2. See Jesperson 1924: 64–71, esp. 66.
3. Maguire 2007: 4, 58.

4. White 1857: 525–8. Cf., too, Rudyard Kipling's poem in "The Elephant's Child": "I keep six honest serving-men | (They taught me all I knew); | Their names are What and Why and When | And How and Where and Who."
5. Ziff 1960: 85–9, perhaps supported by Crystal 1995: 122, where proper names are considered to be on the edge of the lexicon. For a critique of Ziff's position, see Kripke 1980: 32–3.
6. See Ferry 1988: 65; Maguire 2007: 22; Sprat 1667.
7. On this error, see Screech 1979: 388; Barton 1984: 356; Vickers 1984: 95–163; Marks 1988: 212, 231 n.1.
8. Barton 1990.
9. Docherty 1983: 45, 49.
10. Carroll 2000: 208.
11. *OED* 2. "Dumpty", a by-form of "dumpy", meant "a very short person"; see Halliwell-Phillipps 1847. "Humpty-Dumpty" may echo "Dump" and "Dumphry", pet-forms of "Humphrey". Before the eponymous nursery rhyme, the name had been applied to a cannon used by Royalist defenders at the siege of Colchester, which fell from the wall; whereupon "All the king's horses and all the king's men | Couldn't put Humpty together again." See Jack 2008: 80–3.
12. Humpty reverses the situation where proper names usually have no obvious meaning, whereas other words usually have generally shared meanings: see Alexander 1951: 551–66; Mare 1932: 57–8.
13. Sidney 1973: 86.
14. Ragussis 1986: 222.
15. Kermode 2001: 195, 197.
16. Gardiner 1954: 6–7.
17. Kripke 1980: 92–4.
18. See Amis 2000: 262, 292. Cf. Lodge 1992: 7–8.
19. See, e.g., Jack 1991: 102.
20. See Watt 1957: 20; Barton 1990: 91–2.
21. James 1987: 57.
22. See Stone 1985: 191–204, and ch. 8 *passim*.
23. See Seznec 1953: 248.
24. Scaliger 1964: 163 column 2.
25. *Spectator* 451.
26. Stevenson 1922–3: 25.92. Robert the Devil murdered his schoolmaster; see De Quincey 1896–7: 11.437.
27. Ibid. 95.
28. Lamarque and Olsen 1994: 80–1.
29. See David et al. 1979.
30. See Crystal 1995: 66–7.
31. See Pepys 1970–83: 6.173 n. 1.
32. Brahms and Simon 1941: 13, 19, 22, 42, 226.
33. Only Shakespeare, Shakspeare, and Shakspere; see Schoenbaum 1970: 227.
34. Quincey 1896–7: 11.441.
35. Mare 1932: 28.
36. Ibid. 11. 336.