WICKED WORK: DIFFICULTIES AND PARADOXES OF UNNAMING

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Abstract: The paper is a deconstructive approach to Ursula K. Le Guin's short story "She Unnames Them," a brief postmodernist piece of fiction intertextually bringing together, in no more than three-four pages, an array of several widely different explicit (and implicit) allusions to authors and works of various periods and places. Our method is that of discussing first, in each case, these possible "footnotes" to the story and then the specific referential passages that make up the substance of the author's project of unnaming animals; from "yak" to Swift, Eliot and Shakespeare, from the Bible to Linneus, Saussure and Frye…, all of them combined in an absurdist New Wave anti-utopia, challenging many assumptions taken for granted about language and literature.

Keywords: deconstruction, intertextualism, allusion, parody, postmodernism, unnaming

"Language is the main instrument of man's
/woman's ?/ refusal to accept the world
as it is…"

George Steiner, After Babel

Our main purpose in this paper is to bring together, in the order proposed by the author of the story, all the postmodernist/intertextual references that make up the scaffolding of an absolutely remarkable imaginative enterprise. The thrust of our narrative is given by Eve's decision—sometime before the Fall, while she and Adam are still in the Garden of Eden—to take back the names arbitrarily /sic!/ given to them by Adam at God's request or permission. But the Biblical story is revealed as a source only later in the story, so we will stick to the author's random allusions.

Our method throughout will be that of giving first the sources ("results," items) that the author had/may have had in mind (they came first anyway, often long before the text we are dealing with) and then the way the story used them to "manipulate" us and control our "searches." Thus, the first search word is "yak," i.e. *bos grunniens*/grunting—the domesticated yak, or *bos mutus*—the wild one (Linneus comes later): a long-haired massive bovid found throughout the Himalaya and Tibetan Plateau, but also as far north as Mongolia and Russia; the animal is very well adapted to cold weather, is highly friendly in nature (so his attitude in the story is sort of inappropriate), and has grown to be used as a beast of burden as well as to draw ploughs, but also, later, in yak racing in Tibet and Karakorum, yak skiing and even yak polo in some Asian countries; it is believed to have been the ancestor of the modern American bison.

Etymologically, the word comes from the Tibetan *yag* or *gyag* for the male of the species (and here things become challenging for the author of the story), the female being called a *dri* or *nak*; however, in English and in most other languages, the name for the male, *yak*, is used for both sexes; as a matter of fact, The Free Dictionary gives the same word for yak in forty-three languages. Somewhat ironically, the noun/verb yak has grown to mean, in English, gossipy, prolonged, senseless talk or to talk that way, with such derivatives as yakker or yakety-yak, i.e. noisy, trivial talk or conversation.

The process of unnaming having begun in the first paragraph of the story, with most of the animals accepting, willingly or gracefully or carelessly, their new condition of

namelessness, the yaks—or "a faction" of them—protested: "They said that 'yak' sounded right /their language seems to have been English/, and that almost everyone who knew they existed called them that. Unlike the ubiquitous creatures such as rats and fleas, who had been called by hundreds or thousands of different names since Babel, the yaks could truly say, they said, that they had a name… The councils of the elderly females /who are named differently, remember! / finally agreed that though the name might be useful to others, it was so redundant from the yak /male? / point of view that they never spoke it themselves and hence might as well dispense with it." So that, in spring, the designation (signified?) "'yak' was returned to the donor." And thus, henceforth, people—both male and female—would no longer talk about yaks, but probably simply point to them or show pictures of them in case they wanted to communicate anything relating to this animal (this very word seems to have not been "unnamed")—no great loss in many vocabularies of languages other than those in the regions where these creatures are a familiar sight and the word is used frequently.

The main semiotic point here is that yaks are presumed to have their own language (besides English), in which their name is certainly different from "yak"; then the female yaks, who are called by people *dri* or *nak*, take a decision that does not concern them, since yak is only for the males; but so does the author of our chosen story, so we probably have here one of the paradoxes or difficulties of unnaming.

As far as the second intertextual source pursued here ("Dean Swift" and "horses" in the text) is concerned, Jonathan Swift (1667-1745)—MA from Oxford in 1692, Doctor of Divinity/DD from Trinity College, Dublin, and Dean of St. Patrick's in the same city from 1713 onwards—provides more than one venue for the contemporary American author we will keep quoting, though appropriately nameless for the time being. First, the Enlightenment Irish satirist manifested a longstanding concern over the corruption of the English language and had even proposed a language reform (no surprise then that his Houyhnhnms—see infra—have "the pure language"), i.e. a 1712 "Proposal for Correcting, Improving and Ascertaining the English Tongue," in fact a "letter to the Lord High Treasurer of Great Britain," Robert, Earl of Oxford, where, after defavourably comparing English to French, Italian, and Latin, the writer insists upon a recognized standard of spelling first of all.

Second, this "greatest satirist of all times" was fascinated, again throughout his career, by reflections of and parallels to human behavior in the animal world (also one of the main themes of the story under scrutiny here). Next, his masterpiece, Gulliver's Travels, an anatomy of human nature after all, contains large portions dedicated to the value of communication across cultures and how people relate to truth and deception; throughout the travels, language is the key obstacle in Gulliver's understanding of the various cultures he happens to encounter and experience; as an irony of fate, in 1738, Swift started showing symptoms of madness, or "darkness," and four years later, after a stroke, lost almost completely his ability to speak.

The well-known Travels into Several Remote Nations of the World, in Four Parts, by Lemuel Gulliver was first published in 1726-27 and is consistently focused upon the limits of human understanding. Gulliver (though the source word "gullible" would make him naïve, credulous, unsophisticated, even simple, silly, deceivable or foolish) is a gifted linguist, with a facility for translation, who can easily learn the language of his author's imaginary exotic lands; his travels include "A Voyage to Lilliput," "A Voyage to Brobdingnag," "A Voyage to Laputa…, Balnibarbi, Lagado, Maldonada, Glubbdubdrib, Luggnagg and Japan," and "A Voyage to the Country of the Houyhnhnms" (from "4 May 1699 to 5 December 1717").

This fourth voyage that the postmodernist author seems to remember is described by Sanders as a "dark howl of rage against humankind" (p.284); in Houyhnhnm-ean (which

Gulliver learns in the first five months of the two/three years that he spends there)—an orderly and rational, acute and judicious tongue--, the word itself means "the perfections of nature," that is horses who "abound in all excellences that can adorn a rational creature"; in this language the Houyhnhnms have no terms to express anything that is evil ("lie" or "falsehood," "pride"…, all vices), except for those whereby they describe the detestable features of their Yahoos (postmodernist computer search again?)—deformed, odious, human/animal beings (like those unnamed in the po-mo story?—a second paradox) in their base form; they do not only cultivate reason, but also such other virtues as friendship, benevolence, temperance, industry, exercise, and cleanliness, and, as they have no written language, their knowledge is all traditional and they are consequently great poets. Our British traveler (like the yaks in the story, for instance) ironically refuses the name Houyhnhnm and remains a Yahoo who could speak like a Houhnhnm, while showing "some glimmerings of reason"; in fact, what he finally seeks is to be considered an honorary horse rather than an abominable Yahoo, and, back home, aboard a Portuguese ship, in England, Gulliver makes desperate attempts to associate himself with these endowed animals, which leads both to his failure (see similar attempt in the story, infra) and to mental unbalance (the postmodernist author as the source of proto-irony and a third paradox), so he spends several hours a day speaking with his horses in his stables—"my horses understand me tolerably well." In a final "Letter from Captain Gulliver to His Cousin Sympson," dated April 2, 1727, which begins "Yahoo as I am," he (Gulliver or Swift) dramatically shows clear signs of his approaching insanity in the last chapters of the book, changes names (unnames himself?) from the animal that he now is, i.e. a horse, a Houyhnhnm, to a human that he is not, i.e. a Yahoo.

And here is our Houyhnhnm/Yahoo postmodernist author in the second paragraph of the story: "Among the domestic animals, few horses had cared what anybody called them since the failure of Dean Swift's attempt to name them from their own vocabulary." Still, not only the yaks, but most of the other domestic animals seem to have their own vocabulary since "/C/attle, sheep, swine, asses, mules and goats, along with chickens, geese, and turkeys, all agreed enthusiastically to give their names back to the people to whom—as they put it /in their own languages, no doubt/--they belonged." And this new Swift, far from insane, but highly imaginative and convincingly perseverant, goes on: "None were left now to unname, and yet how close I felt to them when I saw one of them swim or fly or trot or crawl across my way or over my skin, or stalk me in the night, or go along beside me for a while in the day…; so close that my fear of them and their fear of me became one same fear. And the attraction that many of us felt, the desire to smell one another's smells, feel or rub or caress one another's scales or skin or feathers or fur, taste one another's blood or flesh /the earlier Swift had not reached the stage of eating Houyhnhnms or being eaten by Yahoos/, keep one another warm—that attraction was now all one with the fear, and the hunter could not be told from the hunted, nor the eater from the food." (sixth paragraph)

Still, the old satirist is not done with as yet, as, while at it, we can remember that in his third voyage Gulliver is still concerned with mental aberration and imbalance when they take him to the "grand academy of Lagado," capital city of the flying/floating (a super-hovercraft, therefore) island of Laputa, where the "projectors in speculative learning" busied themselves with such bizarre and seemingly pointless experiments as extracting sunbeams from cucumbers, or softening marble for use in pillows, or uncovering conspiracies by examining the excrements of suspicious persons, but also with using a weird (Dadaist) engine with forty handles for moving around square bits of wood with words pasted (copy/paste?) on them, and thus building random sentences and writing books in any field of knowledge whatsoever. Most prominently, however, in "the school of languages," one project was "a scheme for

abolishing all words…/not only animal names/" for the sake of brevity and health: "since words are only names for things /Saussure *avant la lettre*/, it would be more convenient for all men to carry about them such things as were necessary to express a particular business they are to discourse on…" But "the women /ironically again in view of what follows/ in conjunction with the vulgar and illiterate /do we need more paradoxes?/" threatened to raise a rebellion, though, finally, many decided to "adhere to the new scheme of expressing themselves by things /or animals/…," in spite of the fact that sometimes too many things/animals would be required.

Since the 18th-century author seems to be swallowing up completely his twentieth-century parodist (though such an oblique imitator is supposed to know very well the source he/she alludes to), we can move on to our next search word, which is "Eliot." Surprisingly enough, the highly difficult modernist poet and critic (1888-1965) is also the author of a 1939 collection of whimsical poems about feline psychology and sociology titled Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats (one can remember that Eliot wrote, alongside "Prufrock," "The Waste Land," "Gerontion," "Four Quartets"…, a 1937 34-line poem entitled "Cows," for the children of his friend Frank Morley). The poem's several adaptations (one film as well) include Andrew Lloyd Weber's 1981 musical Cats, the longest-running Broadway show in history. Quite relevant for our story of "unnaming" is the "Naming of Cats" poem/chapter, where an old man with many cats explains that each of them has three names:

"The naming of cats is a difficult matter. /so is—see infra—their unnaming/
It isn't just one of your holiday games;
You may think at first I'm as mad as a hatter /Swift; Lewis Carroll?/
When I tell you, a cat must have Three Different Names.
First of all, there's the name that the family uses daily…
All of them sensible everyday names.
There are fancier names if you think they sound sweeter,
Some for the gentlemen, some for the dames:
Such as Plato, Admetus, Electra, Demeter—
But all of them sensible everyday names.
But I tell you, a cat needs a name that is particular--…
The name that no human research can discover—
But the Cat himself /herself?/ knows and will never confess.
When you notice a cat in profound meditation,…
His /Her?/ mind is engaged in rapt contemplation
Of the thought, of the thought, of the thought of his /her?/ name:
His /her?/ ineffable effable
Deep and inscrutable singular name…"--

a name so deep and inscrutable that no new-wave, ecofeminist, postmodernist complicated human author can ever take away from it/him/her.

All such an author can do is re-read or rather remember T. S. Eliot and comment (third paragraph) on a doomed to failure process of unnaming: "A couple of problems did come up with the pets. The cats, of course, steadfastly denied ever having had any name other than those self-given, unspoken /unpurred?/, ineffably personal names which, as the poet named Eliot /he should also be probably unnamed/, they spend long hours daily contemplating—though none of the contemplators ever admitted that what they contemplate is their names and some onlookers have wondered if the object of that meditative gaze might not in fact be the Perfect, or Platonic, Mouse. In any case, it is a moot point now." And our point is that the

whole unnaming project is a moot point, i.e. subject to argument/or discussion, doubtful, theoretical, disputable even, of course/, of little or no practical value.

And so, on to the fourth item, already touched upon by Eliot, but which seems to more directly send us to Shakespeare, and that is proper names; in his 1591-95 play published in 1597, Juliet laments (in Act II, Scene 2—the famous Balcony Scene) her misfortune that Romeo is a Montague, i.e. the son of her father's enemy—"O Romeo, Romeo! Wherefore art thou Romeo?"—and asks him to unname himself:

"Deny thy father and refuse thy name:
Or, if you will not, be but sworn my love,
And I'll no longer be a Capulet…
What's a Montague? ... O, be some other name.
What's in a name? That which we call a rose
By any other name would smell as sweet:
So Romeo would, were he not Romeo call'd.
…Romeo, doff thy name,
And for that name, which is no part of thee,
Take myself.
Romeo: I'll take thee at thy word.
Call me but love, and I'll be new baptis'd:
Henceforth I never will be Romeo…
By a name I know not how to tell thee who I am:
My name, dear saint, is hateful to myself…"

An almost complete semiotic debate between the two very young lovers, centuries before Peirce, and Saussure, and Grice, and many postmodernist writers, "troubled," seemingly, by Juliet's problem, only the names here are different: "It was with the dogs, and with some parrots, lovebirds /this cannot be accidental!/, ravens, and mynahs, that the trouble arose. These verbally talented individuals insisted that their names were important /their identities?/ to them, and flatly refused to part with them /here is a lesson for Romeo!/. But as soon as they understood that the issue was precisely one of individual choice /they had no balcony adviser/, and that anybody who wanted to be called Rover, or Froufrou, or Polly, or even Birdie /now, this is too close to the common name!/ in the personal sense, was perfectly free to do so, not one of them had the least objection to parting with the lower case (or as regards German creatures /see one of the names of our author/, uppercase) generic appellations 'poodle,' 'parrot,' 'dog,' or 'bird'…"

Our next search result is Carl Linneus (1707-1778), Swedish botanist, physician, and zoologist who laid the foundation of the modern biological naming scheme of binomial nomenclature; his 1735 Systema Naturae, with a tenth edition in 1758, the 1753 Species Plantarum… turned him into the father of modern taxonomy and of modern ecology; the pets in the story, again, have no problem dispensing with "all the Linnaean qualifiers that had trailed along behind them for two hundred years like tin cans tied to a tail."

The whole project of the story is an obviously Saussurean enterprise; Ferdinand de Saussure (1853-1913), one of the fathers (it looks like these "fathers" should also be unnamed) of 20th-century (structuralist) linguistics and semiotics, in his 1916 posthumously published (by two of his students and disciples) Cours de linguistique generale establishes the conventional nature of language—an unstable social contract, a formal system of differential elements--, made up of linguistic signs that are, each of them, the combination of a signified with a signifier, i.e. things and names that do not go together. The famous Swiss professor and scholar seems to have learned from the likes of Swift that words are not naturally associated

with the things they describe and often replace; that they are collective products of social interaction and essential instruments through which human beings (including postmodernist authors) constitute and articulate their world, rather than mere labels which one can stick to and unstick from/unname things that are previously ordered/: "the purely conceptual mass of our ideas, the mass separated from the language /through this process of unnaming, that comes much later in the century/, is like a kind of shapeless nebula /a Swiftean universe/, in which it is impossible to distinguish anything initially;…the different ideas represent nothing pre-existing /no Yahoos, no Houyhnhnms, no animals…/; there is nothing distinct in thought before the linguistic sign. The signified element alone is nothing, it blurs into a shapeless mass… The word does not exist without a signified as well as a signifying element."(Chapter V) So, the new paradox, from this perspective, is that you cannot just take away the signifying element and leave the signified alone, nameless, unnamed.

And, to end up with, "the principle it comes down to is the fundamental principle of the arbitrariness of the sign…" (Chapter VI and the last one in Cours…)—a principle that is negatively interpreted in the story, when the nameless animals (signifieds without signifiers—a Saussurean impossibility) "seemed far closer than when their names had stood between myself and them like a clear barrier…"; so the sounds and/or letters of words preventing humans—rather than helping them—to be aware of the "indistinct…, shapeless" universe (of animals) around them.

This no-language chaos is easily reminiscent of a world without God in it, as we all learn from the book Genesis of the Hebrew-Aramaic Scriptures: "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth...," then the waters and the dry land, vegetation, the "great luminaries" (on the third day), the sea monsters and other living souls, domestic animals and wild beasts; next came "man in his image…, male and female he created them" (on the sixth day), into whom life was blown as he settled man in the Garden of Eden, home of the tree of knowledge. Then, in 2.19, more specifically: "Now Jehovah God was forming from the ground every wild beast of the field and every flying creature of the heavens, and he began bringing them to the man to see what he would call each one; and whatever the man would call it, each living soul, that was its name. 20: so the man was calling the names of all the domestic animals and of the flying creatures of the heavens and of every wild beast of the field, but for man was found no helper as a complement of him…" So God takes a rib from the sleeping man and builds it into a woman; and there is, of course, the serpent, who, a speaker himself (herself?)/itself, tells the woman—now called Eve—that she could eat from the fruit of the tree in the middle of the garden, because "her eyes are bound to be opened" and she "is bound to be like God, knowing good and bad."

Thus, knowing good and bad and also reading, many thousands of years later, in "The Book of John" from the Christian Greek Scriptures this time, that "in the/another/beginning the word was…," the woman ("bound to be like God"), and now called Ursula, was disturbed by the barrier between these names and the animals, both wild and domestic; so, in an effort of identification (like Gulliver's with the rational horses), "she /the heroine, Eve/ unnames them"; since God could grant Adam the power to name them, the postmodernist author grants Eve the power to unname them, on the basis, probably, of John, 3:19—"Now this is the basis of judgment, that the light has come into the world but men have loved the darkness rather than the light, for their works were wicked." Only we /like many other men?/ would like to turn the tables on Eve and mention the Barnes & Noble twenty-seven book series (print, audio, and ebooks) generically titled Wicked… and containing wicked stories, games, conducts, lies… from such wicked characters as "witches, wenches and wild women," most of them written by such authoresses as Nancy Holder, Tony Taylor, Beth Brown, Lisa Jackson,

Nancy Bush… Not in this series is Wicked: Women's Wit and Humour…, a collection of fiction, drama, poems, essays and quotes from Elizabeth I, Queen Victoria and Queen Mary…, Aphra Behn, Madame de Stael, Jane Austen, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Katherine Mansfield or Agatha Christie…, Marilyn Monroe, Bette Davis, Ginger Rogers, Marlene Dietrich… and Dolly Parton or Nancy Reagan. As far as our subject here is concerned, we can pick almost at random: "The works of women are symbolical" (E. B. Browning): "God is love, but get it in writing" (Gypsy Rose Lee); "Whatever women do they must do twice as well as men to be thought of half as good. Luckily, this is not difficult" (Charlotte Whitton)…

Having achieved her goal, the 20th-century Eve returns us to the Garden of Eden, where she goes to Adam to finally give back her own name; only "he was not paying much attention…, and said only, 'Put it /the name/ down over there, O.K.?' and went on with what he was doing." As Adam shows no sign of willing to listen to what her defense might be (though she herself knows "how hard it would have been to explain herself"), Eve says "goodbye, dear" and "I hope the garden key turns up." Unimpressed, Adam does not look up and continues "fitting parts together…; O.K., fine, dear. When's dinner?"

And so we get to the end of this short short story, where we find that archetypal mythic criticism is in order: in his 1957 Anatomy of Criticism. Four Essays, (Herman) Northrop Frye (1912-1991) describes, in the third essay "Archetypal Criticism: Theory of Myths," the mythos of winter, i.e. irony and satire, where, unsurprisingly, Jonathan Swift figures prominently, alongside literature that makes use of parody, fantasy, fatalism, the technique of disintegration, and which is characterized by figures of misery and/or madness, a sense of the absurd or the grotesque; in other words, everything we find in "She Unnames Them," whose last paragraph ends with a rather despondent Eve: "I could not chatter away as I used to do, taking it all for granted /including animal names/. My words now must be slow, as new, as simple, as tentative as the steps I took going down the path away from the house, between the dark-branched, tall dancers motionless against the winter shining."

The key does seem to finally turn up and be recovered, so we can press "search" for our last results, which refer to postmodernism and some of its more relevant tenets: language can never be original and there is nothing left to say (except its refusal); the meaning conveyed by language is relative (so it can be dispensed with); the truth of history (and of the Bible) is questionable; play with chaos (before and after the Fall); reluctance to accept a given reality (a number of signifieds); New Wave (of the 1960s and 1970s: science fiction and utopias rather than scientific accuracy); ecofeminism; focus on silence and absence (of "names" as well as disruption of language); skepticism; parody again; metafiction; intertextuality…--whence also our deconstructive practice, meant to take us to the final deconstruction, i.e. unnaming the temporarily anonymous author.

Born in 1929, in a nameless city of a nameless state in the western US, in a family where the father was an anthropologist and the mother a writer, while pursuing a doctorate in French Renaissance literature in France, the author got a nameless French spouse and they had three nameless children. They all then lived, from 1958, in another nameless western state. Since "unnaming an anonymous author" means giving this author a name, then this is Ursula Kroeber Le Guin, the twentieth "Grandmaster of the Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers of America" (since 2003). She has written twenty-two novels, over one hundred short stories in eleven collections, seven volumes of poetry, four collections of essays, twelve books for children, several screenplays, translations (from Tao Te Ching).

From a personal note we understand that the first draft of "She Unnames Them" (The New Yorker, 1985) was written down on a cocktail napkin while Le Guin was flying home alone, from New York to Oregon, after getting an award. This may certainly explain why a

(male) reader might happen to have difficulties in understanding some of the themes or messages: the "verbally talented individuals" among animals will have to accept Eve as one of their own, as she also gives up her name in the end (so from language as masculine power to non-language as feminine power); a possibly wordless Eve seems like a contradiction in terms; "them" in the title seems to refer to all creatures—birds, and fish, and mammals…, all of the animals on Planet Earth—only a very important agent, the serpent, does not get unnamed (because he was "more subtil/sic/than any beast of the field" and told "the woman that she shall be as god, knowing good an evil" or because he is then "cursed above every beast of the field" and there will be "enmity between /him/ and the woman?"—Genesis, 3, 5, 14); if one of the themes is that of retelling the old narratives (including the Scriptures), then one should also re-read and re-write other passages in the Bible, like this one from Samuel 15-23: "Because thou hast rejected the word of the Lord, he hath also rejected thee…"; if Le Guin's Adam "misses the whole point of creation" (Doretta Cornell), though we cannot expect him to have read the Bible, then Le Guin's Eve seems to be missing the whole point of language; if Eve's purpose is to decategorize all creatures in order to obtain their freedom from the masculine system of logic and defined borders, and thus begin her own, distinctively female, creation story, then the title for this paper could have been borrowed from Left Hand of Darkness: "Distrust everything I say. I am telling the truth…," which is the real theme of this story: truth is what you distrust and what you trust is false, so, once again, unname truth and trust and you are all right, i.e. wicked.

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