

## NAMING STRATEGIES IN THE 'ONE MINUTE SHORT STORIES' OF ISTVAN ORKENY

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This paper reviews the different strategies of using names in the 'One minute short stories' of Istvan Orkeny, a contemporary innovator of Hungarian prose writing. The main purpose of the case study is to highlight the fact that the use, misuse and abuse of naming in extremely short texts, where naming is hardly used for keeping track of the referential chain, can become a powerful carrier of the author's meaning. Specifically, naming strategies become means to convey the message that personal identity and authenticity become questionable in modern life. Some basic strategies identified in the corpus were the following ones: under- and overcharacterization as two devices to convey depersonalization; opposition between oppressed and oppressor expressed as the opposition between named and unnamed; obtaining a name as the climax of a story; and naming non-human entities as an indicator of the relativity of humanness.

### 1 A plea for excuses

At the 1985 meeting of the American-Hungarian group studying social interaction in literature, I was much impressed by the presentation of Michel Grimaud (1986) on the use of proper names in literary discourse. The paper has proved two things in my eyes. First, that there is much more to look for in proper name usage in literary discourse than the traditional issue of 'telling names'. In particular, his analysis of *The Strength of God* had clearly shown that the maintenance of the 'chain of command' in literary texts is an area where the strictly psycholinguistic issue of keeping track of the cross-referential relations on the part of the reader and the use of the possible options of reference to characterize the protagonists, their relationships and the author's relation to their behaviour go hand in hand. In traditional discourse the writer is bound to keep actors clearly separate by building up an unequivocal referential map but at the same time apply the (quasi)definite descriptions used to refer to the actors for the purposes of characterization.

Second, the approach taken by Grimaud has also encouraged me to feel free to combine a humanities approach with concepts taken from contemporary cognitive science without a necessary recourse to direct experimentation.

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Grimaud (1986) claimed in his paper that the Hungarian short stories analyzed used much less personal names than the ones in the American corpus. During the discussion of his paper there was a lot of talk about the possible intercultural differences implied by this fact (e.g. depersonalization, etc.). In order to test the implication that the mere presence or absence of names has such straightforward interpretations, I have designed a case study of a single author. My aim is to show within the relatively homogeneous corpus of a single author the use of the different possible strategies of naming in contemporary literature. A very peculiar type of texts was selected where characterization in the traditional sense and keeping track of the events is not central. This allows naming itself to become a central device of the writer. The ambition of the present paper is more taxonomic than anything historical or comparative. What I want to show is that it is not the lack of names in itself that is important here but their conscious use by the author.

## 2 The corpus and the method of analysis

István Orkény (1912–1979) is one of the foremost innovators of contemporary Hungarian drama and prose writing. His topics and style as well show a fine feeling for the absurdity of 20th century life. Part of the impact of his writings is rooted in his talent to present absurdity as if it were a matter of ordinary life. We have every reason to believe, as his self-disclosures in his volume entitled *A dialogue about the grotesque* (Orkény (1986)) show, that this might very well have been his opinion.

The *One minute short stories* are one of his stylistic innovations although he himself repeatedly disclaimed originality here in the four interviews he had given on the stories (Orkény (1986)). As the running head title of the stories had repeatedly suggested when they originally appeared in literary magazines and as the author himself has admitted, they were literally meant to be read 'within a minute'. They are usually no more than two printed pages long (sometimes only 8–10 lines). Few of them have a realistic topic and clearcut narrative organization. If there is a narrative plot, usually some shift of perspectives alienates the reader. The story plot itself becomes a mere tool to present the real dramatic event, what is a story with regard to narrative patterns may be the real tragedy for others like in *Two onion coupoles in snowy landscape* where the plot tells the already rather dramatic event of the hanging of a Russian woman during the war only to culminate in our realization that for the curious onlooker girl, the woman had been *Mom*. In other cases the narration is mocked by substituting absurd protagonists into the narrative slots (dead persons, objects, pieces of objects, etc.). Most of the short stories do not have a narrative organization whatsoever, some of them imitate the

hortative textual type (like the one giving instructions for what to do after tomorrow February 1st the day of the end of the world) others are dialogues still others inner monologues or letters (complaint farewell) questionnaires information on a tramway ticket etc. The German edition calls them 'mini short stories' (*Mininovellen*, Orkény (1979)) but the French label characterizes them better as *minimithes* (Orkény (1970))

Fortunately for the present purposes the lack of narrative content and the non-prototypical use of narration do not radically reduce naming in the texts. I have selected as a corpus the 52 texts collected as 'Selected one minute short stories' in the selected short stories volume of the author published while he was still alive (Orkény (1971)). The presently definitive collection incidentally contains a much larger corpus (Orkény (1984)). Out of the 52 texts of my corpus only in 17 was naming and reference to particulars (be it persons or objects) entirely irrelevant. For the 35 short stories considered for naming strategies the following method was used. First a main protagonist was identified. If the text was written in first person the most central actor besides the narrative 'I' was located. References to this person (or object) were screened throughout the text with the following categories in mind: name initials generic term (man girl) qualifying description (young the dying etc.) qualifying description plus generic term (e.g. the dying girl) pronoun. Concerning the last category it has to be kept in mind that since Hungarian is a pro-drop language pronouns are rarely used for the main protagonist in a story except if they are used contrastively.

Starting from this general characterization each text was individually analyzed as to the maintenance of cross reference and possible use of naming strategies for literary effect.

### 3 The cognitive need for unequivocal reference

Even in the non-prototypical short stories, there are cases where the author has to keep track of the different actors. Since within the self-imposed limitation of space the author has hardly a possibility for elaborate characterization this is done in narrative-like contexts with the use of exclusively applied generic terms or chunks of definite descriptions. In *There is no news* a dead woman wakes up in the cemetery and gets involved in interactions with quite a few (real) persons hanging around in the cemetery. Not only is each of them identified with a descriptor (*a taxidriver an old lady in black*) but with each dialogue and interactional turn the descriptors are consequentially used to allow the construction of an exact model. However in the strange unrealistic scene all of this has a parasitic stylistic impact. This effect is reinforced by the unnecessarily exact descriptions given for some participants their social

characterization (*Barannikov* *Apostol* *Bulgarian flower gardener who was selling flowers at the gate of the cemetery* *Dezso Deutsch*, *fishing rod maker shop owner*) has no consequence for what they are doing or saying.

The seemingly innocent device of keeping track of the participants can become a tool to convey the message: there are no things of real consequence or interest in this world (the lady indeed draws that conclusion and goes back to the grave). In another story *The last sour cherry seed* the issue of unequivocal reference becomes even more saliently an essential part of the story. Only four Hungarians remain (in Hungary). One of them is hard of hearing, two are under police surveillance, and only a single one remembers his name (Sipos). In the case of four people it is not so important for each of them to have a name. From here on, reference becomes some sort of a puzzle: we have identifying expressions like 'the fourth Hungarian, who was neither called Sipos nor was he under police surveillance'. Even the point of the story is based on the abuse of referential pedantry: Sipos stands on the shoulder of the others who shout to him to pick the last cherry, in vain, however, i.e. he was the one who was hard of hearing. The author informs us. In this way, on the processing level, the entire story becomes an exercise *à la* *Musil* in how you can refer to people without features (ohne Eigenschalten) and names, but this exercise becomes, in its turn, the carrier of a basic meaning.

In some of the texts (8) the entire text is a dialogue between two people. In some of them (*Honeymooners*, *We have choice*, *The habitual*) there is some identification of the changing partners: they are identified very economically, only by a repetitive mention of their function relevant in the interaction. The persons become identical with the roles they fulfil (husband-wife, passenger-hostess, *customer-waiter*). There are only two interlocutors in each case, i.e. there is no need for the repetition. Thus constant repetition is far from being innocent. This device culminates in *There is always hope* where the dialogue is between an *official* and an *inquirer*, but about a rather strange topic: the purchase of the best tomb. In *Information* the presentation becomes even more puritanic: we have the dialogues between (supposedly) a doorman and his interlocutors without any identification of the doorman.

#### 4 Under- and overcharacterization as two devices to convey depersonalization

Orkeny has rather frequent recourse to two devices in the use of proper names to present the shaky nature of personal identity in the modern world. The first is a dysfunctional overpedantry in giving personal identity. In some of the texts the protagonist is identified according to an official scene, almost like in a statistical data base. In the already mentioned *There is no news* piece, the

awakened body is identified as *Mrs Michael Hajduska born Stefany Nobel Song* a story about an indefatigable singer on the Russian front starts with the identifying sentence *The singer was called Jenő Janasz Gli Ungheresi* (The Hungarians) tells the story of the invention of ice-cream and starts with a sentence *The icecream was invented by a confectioner from Catania named Ugo Ricardo Salvatore Giulio Girolamo B* In the *New proverb* (explaining that proverbs may be born even today) there is again an overprecise introduction of the protagonist *a man turned up (Karoly Rakasza hole-digger) in village B of Heres county*

In some of these cases the reader has the feeling that the overidentification is intended to show how irrelevant personal identity is *The car driver* goes further to indicate how irrelevant a person is Someone buys tomorrow's newspaper reads about his own death there but still follows the route where he is supposed to die He is given a proper name and a rather exact description at the beginning *Jozsef Pereszlenyi unskilled worker has stopped with his Wartburg car with license plate CO 75-14 at the newsstand* The description is of course exactly repeated in the newspaper Our exact identity becomes relevant when it is a matter of police news

In one text this overspecification is given in the title while the text does not contain any reference to the hero It is a meditation of a pagan while being executed The title gives an entire medieval definite description *Thoughts of Sutto son of pagan Sutto while his body was torn into four parts on the orders of Yencelin bishop of Abadszalók*

On the opposite pole the author uses the device of Franz Kafka (*Joseph K*) quite a few times by using only initials *What is this? What is this?* tells the story of a family building a suburban house only to realize in the house that their skin is itchy in the new place There is a deliberate play with names here the family asked for their name to be left out (like in a court story) so they are *family J* and the doctor called for help also asked that only his initials be made public In *The dedications of a Hungarian writer* the entire text is a play of names While the people honoured with the dedications are mainly identified with full names the writer is always signed only as *Tu De Te* Even in the introduction he (?) and his museum are introduced by the same initials what is familiarity in the main body of the text (in the dedications) becomes the irrelevance of identity by this device The writer has no personality but the changing roles made evident from the changing dedications *In memoriam dr K H G* is the deadly dialogue on German poets between Dr K H G (supposedly but not ostensibly an interned Jew) and a German guard who eventually shoots the too smart Dr K H G What remains relevant (and dangerous) of his identity in this interaction is his education conveyed by the Dr put before his initials *The castle belongs to everyone* is a letter of complaint written to the authorities The author of the letter is ambiguously identified he gives his initials but a full address

## 5 Opposition between oppressed and oppressor as nameless and named

Orkeny has also created texts that provide a royal way for someone who is looking for the function of names. In some cases, the issue of social oppression becomes openly related to having a proper name or not. In the narrative already mentioned *Two onion coupoles in snowy landscape*, the victim is referred to as *the woman or the condemned* while sergeants, army doctors and executioners all have full names.

In one of the texts *Let us learn foreign languages!*, this opposition is presented in a more tricky way. In a cruel war scene, the unnamed first person hero is abused by a German sergeant. However, through the workings of a Hungarian mistranslator/soldier, the rank of the German (*Feldwebel*) is presented throughout the text as if it was a name. There is a powerful ambiguity here: the German acts as if he was a person (as if he had a name) but in fact he only has a role: that of being a German sergeant.

The named-unnamed opposition enters the texts where objects are made into heroes. In *The Great March*, the underdog hero (the egg) has no name while all the others who join his march are given full names (sometimes of real persons like Bertold Brecht).

The opposition between named and unnamed also shows up in two paired texts. In *The death of the actor*, the *popular actor* is given a full name (*Zoltan Zetelaki*) and his misfortune is provided with exact coordinates. In *The death of the spectator*, there are no names, no location. As opposed to the fate of the artist, this text is about the generic.

## 6 Obtaining a name as the climax of the story or the victory of the oppressed

In some of the texts, the otherwise unnamed hero is given a name around the end. This device has strong rhetorical effects. Sometimes it culminates the tragedy, it highlights the personhood of a statistical category, or it can actually imply a moral victory of the unnamed over the oppressive forces of society.

An example for the first use is the text actually entitled *Climax* (In Hungarian the first meaning of this loan word is menopause.) It tells the story of the suicide of a fifty-year-old woman: we have the exemplification of a social disease here to learn her name only at the end, from the signature of her farewell letter.

This device is the clearest, however, in the text *Trill*. The main body of the text is a dull description of the work of a typist: *She turns the paper out of the machine. Picks up new sheets. Inserts the carbon between them. Writes.* This is repeated verbatim three times. Then the fourth repetition is modified: *She turns the paper out of the machine. She has been with the company for twenty*

years Eats cold food Lives alone And then the final paragraph turns her into a person She is called Mrs Wolf Let us remember Mrs Wolf Mrs Wolf Mrs Wolf

There are some examples for the other usage: victory of the oppressed or victory of life over destruction as well. In the peaceful scene of *One room mud walls and shingle roof* the female ethnographer makes an interview with an old peasant woman. The author refers to the peasant woman with a rather pejorative word for *matron* while the ethnographer refers to her as *aunt* (in Hungarian this is a generic term and a vocative for women of a certain age). At the same time the ethnographer is always referred to meticulously by her full professional name Mrs Kaszoly Hanna Kakas. The inequality of naming trivially conveys the inequality of social status. However, there is revenge: at the end we learn that the grandson of the old woman also attends the university. He is given a name (*our Joseph*) and his speciality (cybernetics) is told by another grandson who – as a pun or twist to the naming of the old woman – is just reading Balzac *Cousin Betty*. These are the last words of the text.

*Budapest* describes the city after a nuclear strike. We have here an example for the use of names as signs of the victory of humanity over the destructive forces. An entire page of the abstract, depersonalized description of devastation is followed by a note posted the day after: *Mouse extermination with your own bacon Dr Mrs Tarsányi*. Life continues. So do names.

In *It is not you* the reverse strategy is used. We read a long list of names, sometimes with a description of the circumstances (of their death). The death is only inferred: all sentences are broken. We have the referential expressions but never the predicate. And as a counterpoint to the long list of names the text closes with the line: *Not yet you*.

## 7 Non-human entities

The interest towards depersonalization and towards the mockery of the traditional narrative schemata comes out very clearly where Orkeny allocates the role of the protagonist to a non-human entity.

One of these has already been mentioned. *The great march* is a chain story with an egg as the protagonist. In *A disillusioned tulip* a tulip commits suicide with all the prototypical accompaniments: letter of farewell, uncertainty about the motives in the environment, police investigation. In *No matter we succeeded in solving one controversial issue the next puzzle awaits us* the use of a non-human entity itself becomes an issue. The story is about a flower that goes to the toilet only to realize that being a flower it does not have too much to do at the toilet.

*Complaints of a piece of rice* goes further. Not only does the rice represent massive depersonalization through its semantic-cognitive content but it meditates on this depersonalization. The postman calls him by a count noun (rice). *We do not have names because why should we* – meditates the rice. *You can name two kinds of cheese, two tooth-pastes, two novels in order to avoid messing them up. But two rices?* It goes on to describe its own individual characteristics: the entire text becomes an exercise in what can have individuality and thereby names.

## 8 Closing remarks

In the short texts of the *One minute short stories*, naming and referential expressions do not serve the usual function of helping to build up integrated images about the actors. Thereby a road is opened for the writer to use naming and reference to convey messages not about his heroes but about his own world view. The examples classified above hopefully indicate what a powerful tool this may become. Orkeny is a very conscious master of reference in these texts. Let me illustrate this with a final example that does not concern the issue of personhood. *In our time* (given this English title after Hemmingway) gives the story of a man and a woman entering a cafe and talking about their vacation. The woman orders coffee. The man wants ostensibly something else: a dark, almost black liquid, served in glass, with a spoon on the side and small white cubes on the plate. This is the prototypical description of coffee as served in a cafe: no one (waiters, boss) realizes what he wants, so finally he agrees to order a coffee.

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