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Norma Rosen's At the Center: A Literary Onomastic Interpretation

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The central irony in Norma Rosen's *At The Center* is that of all the dedicated doctors, aides, nurses, who give themselves so tirelessly to free women from unwanted pregnancies, with the most careful, up-to-date procedures, and the highest idealism, not one, as we come to know their histories, was a wanted child. Some of the questions this poses are framed by the jacket blurb:

To the question society so frantically asks: "What shall we do about our unwanted offspring?" Norma Rosen's novel replies with an even more urgent one:

"What shall we do about ourselves?"

With perfect symmetry the novel opens and closes with a married couple who are both doctors. The childless couple, Dr. Edgar and Dr. Ellen Bianky, who have founded the abortion clinic are balanced by Dr. Daniel and Dr. Amy Brodaw, to whom, after much suffering, a son is born at the end. Against the millions of fetuses that have been scraped out of inhospitable wombs, is this single birth.

The dustcover is illustrated with a bowl of fruit and a stethoscope. The instrument for listening to sounds within the body literally means "to see" (scope) inside the chest (Greek, stethos). This not only suggests Dr. Ellen Bianky's function as radiologist, but implies, also, her ability to penetrate her husband's thoughts, even to "see" his dreams. The stethoscope, as emblem of the medical profession, conveys the legal, safe, modern procedures by means of which unwanted "fruit" is destroyed. The clusters of grapes, the apples, bananas, oranges also signify Dr. Edgar Bianky's generosity. Each woman awakens
in the recovery room to the smell of fresh fruit on her bedside table. The promise implicit here is that fruitfulness awaits her who wishes it. The rich mixture of accents among the staff indicates their diverse ethnicity. By assembling Orientals, Italians, Puerto Ricans, Jamaicans, Anglo Saxons and Jews, the author allows herself to explore a multitude of moral perceptions of the issue of abortion. Their names both delineate character and make judgments. The author, herself, plays with onomastics in several passages.

Hubbub of voices and accents at nearby tables. West Indian, Spanish, Irish—plus a din of dialects, American-born. After the manner of nurses, the aides call each other by their last names. Warner. Bomstein. Selig. Only Marv is Mary, in the mysterious ways of naming among colleagues. (28)

Edgar Bianky worries about his two brilliant but erratic Jewish partners, Charlie, the teacher, and his pupil, "Paul of the ironic surname: Sunshine." (14) He also has nightmares about the possible death of a patient. He worries that, someday, he may be responsible for someone's dying. In his dreams, she is always Mrs. X.

It's always the same. The woman's name is Genevieve. He knows her first name is Genevieve. The last eludes him. Storm? No. That had been a colleague of his. Muller? That doesn't fit his dream rhythms. It's something a little off. Smoth? Jeens?
Whett? Bluck? Brewn? She's X. Nothing else feels right." (9)

When the new aide, Amy Netboy, comes to work at the Center, everyone puns on her name. Charlie says: "Netboy's her name? Good. I hope she'll draw the net tighter," by which he means that she may "sieve out disaster." (122) A patient reads her nametag disbelievingly: "Amy Netboy. Is that what you are? Someone who retrieves what can't make it over the net?" To Dr. Edgar, Amy seems a revenant of his sister Mimi in whose memory he had founded the Center. She had died, at twenty, of a botched, illegal abortion. He had considered altering his name when he established his clinic, to remove its Catholic flavor. He did not do so because he "could never bring himself to join the ranks of background-changers ashamed of forebears." (14) But he remained unforgiving of the Church, whose strictures he blamed for Mimi's tragedy.

The permutations of grandparent-generation immigrating had altered the spelling of the family name from the Italian Bianch to its present form. Edgar would have liked to change it again to the anglicized Banks, and to call the Center that, the Banks Family Planning Center. So unforgiving had he felt. (13)

When he reproaches himself, Edgar does so by using his Italian middle name: "Ah Guiseppe! He whispers inwardly the name his mother had protectively tucked between the two Americanized ones." (112) Sometimes he thinks that, in spite of his New England wife, he has managed "to turn his life into an Italian
opera:

So—he says it to himself with disgust—why don't you put on a baggy white satin costume with big red pompoms and walk down the corridors of the Center in it?

Pagliacci! (113)

Etymologically, the name Edgar means happiness, riches, property. It derives from the root "ead" which means wealth. The truncated Italian surname means white. Both names are ironic. Fanatics burn his Sixth Avenue property at the end. All the love and generosity of spirit he had invested in reparation for his sister's death is destroyed. Nor is he white, but swarthy, black-haired, olive-skinned. He cannot tamp down the fires in his soul, nor can he silence the coloratura shrieks of Mrs. X he hears in his dreams; nor the 'forte' cries of his father's cursing, and his mother's screaming at Mimi's fate. The name, Edgar, connotes his edginess, the tension. The word "edgar" first listed in the O.E.D. in 1350 means "one who wields a sharp-edged tool." This gentle, warmharted, sensitive man who fears wounding, or inflicting pain, is made edgy by his profession. His wife, Ellen, sees him as burdened, heart-attack-prone, and always drenched in sweat, "as if existence itself is too hot for him." (8)

She is as cool, as restrained, as he is hot-blooded and passionate. She is all elegant control. And he "chills himself in her coolness." (7) The name, Ellen, suggests "elite," and is cognate with "eloign" (to take away, to convey to a distance),
which is what she attempts to do for him. She monitors and mitigates.

What she wants is to apply words like little dabs of caustic, useful for emotions that threaten to push up and infect everything. 'Now, that's a useless worry.' Ellen dabs often and briskly at Edgar. (7)

Furthermore, since she is still childless after fifteen years of marriage, her name implies a link with the virgin, Saint Elene, whose day is May 18.

The beautiful, young aide, Amy Netboy, who ensnares all their hearts is aptly named. From the Latin, amare, to love, are derived amour, amity, amiable, amicable. Since it is she who becomes a mother at the end, it is also appropriate that both in Latin and in Hebrew, amma means mother. Both her parents were killed in a car crash when she was a baby, so she attempted to mother her older brother, to always be compliant. Raised by a grandmother who knows most of Margaret Sanger by heart, she comes to work committed to freedom of choice, to liberation. The grandmother's quoting of Margaret causes some confusion one day at lunch when she has invited a staff doctor, Paul, to meet her. Paul's domineering ex-wife is also named Margaret, and he thinks, at first, that it is she who has scripted all their parts. Paul grew up in a Brooklyn slum without a father. He escaped his gloomy mother and his impoverished neighborhood through scholarships to college. He had to settle for a South American medical school, and occasionally recites his anatomy lessons in Spanish. It is appropriate that his name, Paul, derives from the
Roman surname, Paulus, meaning small, or little. It is from the same root as pauper, poor, impoverished.

He is grateful that he had only daughters, because his ex-wife had been so engrossed in her evening school psychology classes that had she borne sons, she would have called them Sigmund and Karl Gustav. As it is, she has named the girls "Karen and Helene, after two female psychiatrists." (46)

Throughout their bad marriage, Margaret had expended so much energy enumerating his faults, that he can list them all, in her words. Paul's deprived childhood has left him awkward. He continually spills things, knocks over things, bumps into things. In search of a father figure, he, in his wife's words, "fixated" on Dr. Charles Brodaw with whom he interned, and in whose house he lived after his divorce.

The son of a famous doctor, "exalted by the reverence of women in thousands, some of them blessing in Yiddish his gold hands." (38)

Driving home to Westchester, Charles holds mute conversations with his dead father, who yells at him: "Murderer! What are you doing to Jewish babies!" (64)

Never free of this censuring specter, in whose office he began to practice obstetrics, it is ironic that his name, Charles, should be derived from the Old English word for freeman: churl. Because he never dared to express his resentment of him during his life, Charles is enslaved to the rebuking ghost whose shadowy form still seems to inhabit the black leather hollows of his office chair. Above all, he fears that he is becoming like his father. The elder Dr. Brodaw had been too busy to sit shiva on his wife, so
Charles had to observe the week of mourning of his mother, alone. Aunt Frieda came to look after his brother, and to raise him. Charles fears that his devoted wife, Sylvia, is becoming another Frieda. He is angry that she has been so conditioned to her lot that she does not perceive it as enslavement. They had met when she answered his father's ad for a three-week replacement receptionist. They had married because she had become pregnant. It angers him that she is reconciled to serving him, and that she pretends to herself that she had wanted their son, Daniel. Paul watches Charlie's struggle to liberate Sylvia and thinks, enviously, how Charles is repudiating just what Paul most desires: a doting woman. "Paul had, from the first, been fascinated by this aristocrat of renunciation, his opposite in every way, who practiced an idealism close to heroic, with a scorn close to contempt." (73)

Afflicted with a stammer, Charles's speech is always a compromise. He has to settle for another word than the one he wanted to utter. Amy thinks of the words that characterize him: stoic, suffering, saintly, all of which give him difficulty as she unbraids her thick plait and sees her hair twist in "s's", as if her hair were stuttering for his sake. Once the pudgy, privileged son of a rich doctor, Charles has grown lean since his illness, a cancer of the bowel. Amy longs to nurse him for the few years he has left. Because he is aware of his impending death, Charles insists that Sylvia find herself. He encourages her to find a job, to take courses. She gets work in the registrar's office at NYU. After she is independent, he takes
his son, Daniel, skiing, to explain to him that they both love him. As he writes to Edgar: "It was either pass on my father's silence or speak." (137) Charles, who had secretly referred to his father as "the King" refuses to allow himself to be aggrandized. He, therefore, becomes enraged when Daniel tells him that he is a saint, wanting happiness for everyone else, refusing it for himself. His anger aggravates his stutter so that he cannot respond in words. Later, when 22-year-old Amy offers herself to him, he yields to her advances only for Daniel's sake, to refute his assertion that he refuses happiness.

The other young aide, Hannah Selig, who had come to work at the Center, spends most of her free time taking notes in a battered blue looseleaf. Begun as a letter to Rabbi Pinchas, who has moved, with his entire congregation, to New Jersey, it continues as a record of their spiritual lives. Hannah meditates on the Biblical Hannah's attempt to argue with God, who seemed to ignore female voices raised in protest. Her ongoing quarrel began with the injustice of her brother's death in the camp; she, the American-born child, could never take his place. Because she wanted to study in the university, because she refused to marry the suitors proposed for her, she felt exiled from the community. When her parents were killed in their shabby Williamsburg apartment, she saw that as a judgment. It was then that she began deliberately flouting all the Commandments, mixing meat and milk utensils, writing on the Sabbath, living with a lover without betrothal, and noting every violation down, so that he might "hear for a change a woman's voice" raised in defiance.
of every code, every rabbinical elaboration.

Her name, Hannah, echoes the ancient word of journal, *ana*. The O.E.D. notes that *ana* was used, 1727, in Chambers' *Cyclopedia*, for "collections of memorable sayings." Southey, 1834, called *Boswell's Life of Johnson* "the ana of all ans." From *ana*, is derived the verb *annual*, "to record events, to chronicle." This is what Hannah does, relentlessly. Her legacy to Paul, who pursues her across the country at the end, is a journal in which she has written about this pursuit of goodness: "A person who likes to make himself better goes to my heart." (110)

Hannah is also the Hebrew word for graciousness from the stem chanah: be gracious. Her last name, Selig, is the word for blessed. Sylvia says of her that she has "a saint complex. She wants to be one of the 36 righteous." (260) To Paul, her notebooks crammed with Yeshiva wisdom sometime seem his last possibility of salvation. It is Hannah who foresees what will happen in Amy's unborn baby, and who tries to save its life. First she appeals to Paul. She plays on Paul's jealousy. Later, he admits to himself that this has been his "old affliction. What Charlie has, I have to crave!" (165) In asking Paul to marry Amy, she invokes the Biblical precept of the Levirate marriage. She proposes that he marry his dead brother's wife to raise up his seed to his name. (244)

The suggestion seemed already implied in the dying brother's name: Brodaw is a compound of "brod," the Old English for "offspring, brood," and "dawer," the Germanic term for "husband's"
brother;" which in Latin is **levir**, from which levirate is derived. Thus, the author, concealing a character's hidden fate in his name, predicts behavior.

Paul, wrestling with this destiny, visits Sylvia to discuss it; talks with Daniel; fights with Hannah, insisting that he loves and wants to marry her. Amy finds this solution preposterous, and tells Hannah that she is renouncing Paul out of martyrdom only, and tells her "If you want to be a saint, go and work with the poor in India." (245) Hannah finally decides to appeal to Ellen. Perhaps she will agree to adopt Charles' baby.

Ellen reminds Hannah that she was a charter member of N.O.N.E., No Offspring Now or Ever; furthermore that she and Edgar had pledged themselves to a childless marriage, saving, "Let's not preach water and drink wine." (169) She claims that their marriage had been their child. It was "a fusion of their two selves...as close-woven as the cells of any blastocyst." (231)

Charles finally solves the problem by performing the abortion himself, on his own baby, and then going off to die in a hotel room, surrendering himself to the relentless growth in his own abdomen. His son, Daniel, determines at his father's funeral to dive into wreckage and to "snatch out his father's laurel." He commits himself to studying medicine. He marries Amy. Hannah, leaving the Center for good, comes in to get the last check, and gives Amy and Daniel "double-cheek kisses like a Libavitcher at a farbregen" and assures them that in Tamar and
Judah, there is a Biblical precedent for their union.

In Hannah's journal, which Paul studies as he pursues her westward flight, is the Hebrew word for abortion, "lo samnu." She translated this to mean that we are not yet finished, not perfected, not concluded. Her intention is to lift up the divine sparks, to let men see what they might yet become.

This same kind of aspiration was behind Charles' treatment of an Orthodox woman who had borne ten children, the three oldest delivered by his father, the other seven by him. At the sight of Tovah Melnick in her shabby black dress, her heavy wig nearly hidden under a black kerchief, "something imprisoned in Charlie's life seems to screech." (87) She asks him to speak on her behalf to Rabbi Tarn about terminating her eleventh pregnancy. Charles refuses. He tries to force her to assume the responsibility: "You have to say you want it...that your own life is worth something too!" (88) She resists because of religious strictures. He is white-faced with the knowledge that he, too, had been a dead soul all his life. The power of this novel lies in the attempts of the characters to live up to their names. Charles' aspiration to become a free man, and so, to liberate others. He "struggled all his life to do what seemed honorable and right." (133) Amy's to be loving, to "make all well...make them all happy!" (218) "Above all, she wishes to give herself...where she is most needed." (133) Both Margarets in this book, Paul's ex-wife and the oft-quoted Margaret Sanger, are self-sufficient. Margaret is a Greek noun of Oriental origin, probably Iranian, meaning pearl. Thus it is an emblem of the
narcissistic woman, hard, self-valuing, a lustrous globe of great price formed within a shelled enclosure. The novel considers this saying of Margaret Sanger’s: "The basic freedom of the world is women’s freedom. A free race cannot be born of slave mothers." (129) Edgar, who had dedicated himself to his noble ideal, saw it daily eroded, and then, from a fanatic’s firebomb, finally explode. Where, he asked himself, were his "hopes for the future of the race, dreams, plans for a better world?" (167) And Ellen, who nurtures him, feels her husband’s pain in his own operatic terms, as if she had internalized his language. She feels "a musical pain, a coloratura attack, with trills above, an alto ache below." (313) What she gives birth to, is a plan to work beside him in the new, more modest clinic they will rebuild together. Paul, who started out feeling that "he had been cheated by life and wanted his share" (277) ended up painfully "giving birth to a new self" (294). Hannah has made him realize that "all acts are judged" (299) and that his life is not yet finished, not yet sealed, still open to redemption. Rabbi Elias Pinchas had pleaded with him on Hannah’s behalf to "Save at last this poor girl’s life." (308) Paul seeks for his own salvation in trying to save her. Hannah had scribbled in her journal: "God demands that we restore ourselves and the world to goodness. The joy of knowing that this task can have no end!" (250) Hannah even understands Edgar’s dark fantasy. "Have you achieved what you worked so hard for?—a Center, a haven, a place where your sister’s death can be redeemed by the rescued lives of a million women? Why then, Genevieve X will be sent to you."
(104-5) Who is this nemesis? The first two syllables: gene, to be born, should generate a thousand associations in the context of this novel. All of its characters have yet to complete the task of giving birth to the selves they might still become.

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