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IRONY AND ALLUSIVENESS IN GIDE'S ONOMASTICS

Jesse Levitt

André Gide's themes and images are often reinforced through a variety of onomastic devices. This intent is perfectly obvious in his common use of Biblical and mythological names, such as Saul, David, Theseus, and Oedipus. In Le Prométhée mal enchaîné the introduction of mythological gods and heroes like Prometheus, Zeus, Horatio Cocles, and Damocles into modern Paris is grotesque and humorous.¹ In less obvious and more subtle ways, Gide uses etymology, phonetic resonance, literary references, humorous and satirical allusions, and puns in his choice of names. The title of his early symbolist novel, Voyage d'Urien, is based on a pun; the voyage is imaginary--voyage du rien.² In Paludes almost interchangeable names suddenly appear, only to disappear soon afterwards.³

In Les Caves du Vatican, the word caves carries a multiplicity of meanings and allusions. Its meaning "cellars" suggests imprisonment or immurement; the characters of the novel are hemmed in by psychological walls, or are "caught in systems that flatten their individual existences and strip them of all substance." The Vatican cellars, where the Pope is allegedly being held prisoner by the Freemasons, are non-existent; "the fictitiousness of the Vatican cellars serves among others to poke fun at the illusoriness of human motivations."⁴ The word cave in slang may mean a prejudiced person, a bourgeois, a simpleton, a dupe, or the paying client of a prostitute; all of these meanings are applicable to some extent to the anti-heroes of the novel. Finally, the master swindler Protos uses as one of his pseudonyms Abbe Cave, explaining that in Latin, cave means "beware."⁵

Lafcadio Wliuki seems to have acquired his given name from Lafcadio Hearn (1850-1904), the author of numerous books about Japan, who was born on the Greek Ionian isle of Levkás, known in ancient times as Leucadia (pronounced Lefcadia), of an Anglo-Irish father and Greek-Maltese mother. He spent eighteen years in the United States, finally settling and marrying in Japan, where he became a Japanese subject and was converted to Buddhism. In 1906, two years after his death, Gide first used the name Lafcadio in this Journal for his "cosmopolitan, uprooted bastards." The name Wliuki, pronounced Louki according to Gide, may have been suggested by Vlăchi, the inhabitants of the province of Walachia, Rumania, where Lafcadio was presumably born, or by the Russian adjective velikiy "great"; Lafcadio has in fact learned Russian from one of his "uncles."⁶

The chief of the international band of swindlers who exploit the faithful for contributions to liberate the Pope from his supposed captivity is named Protos, from the Greek word for "first, original, primitive." In the novel, it is explained that he won first prize in his class in Greek composition. Protos, however, also suggests Proteus, the sea god who was able to change his form at will, and whom Protos resembles by the multiplicity of his disguises.⁷ Holdheim finds in Protos a "subtly autobiographical slant." "Is he not Gide, the Proteus ... who refuses to be pinned down by any one attitude, writes each book to counteract the preceding one and finally longs for a novel which would express his contradictoriness all at once?"⁸

Anthime Armand-Dubois is an atheistic scientist whose name suggests the noun anathème (anathema). In one episode, he throws his wooden crutch, i.e. his wooden weapon, arme en bois, at a statue of the Madonna, breaking her arm, upon which a miracle occurs-- his lumbago is cured and he is converted to Christianity. His brother-in-law, Julius de Baragliouf, writes insipid, conventional novels on the platitudes of bourgeois Catholic morality in the hope of being elected to the French Academy. His name suggests baragouin, "gibberish, jargon," or it may perhaps be derived from the Italian baro, "a coffin," and the pejorative suffix -gliuolo, "a peddler."

A third brother-in-law, Amé dée Fleurissoire, has a given name meaning "beloved of God" and a family name suggesting flowers, Fleurissoire, the virgin husband, will depart like Sir Perceval or Sir Galahad on a crusade to save the Pope from the Freemasons and will be led by the facchino or porter Baptistin, the baptized one, to a hotel where he will be baptized into the mysteries of sexual intercourse by a good-hearted prostitute named Carola Venitequa, whose last name means in Italian "come hither."⁹

Fleurissoire's wife, Arnica, and her two sisters, Marguerite, meaning "daisy", the wife of Julius, and Véronique, meaning "veronica" or "speedwell," the wife of Anthime, also have names suggesting flowers. The three sisters had so been named by their father, the botanist Philibert Péterat, whose family name suggests the future tense of the verb péter, "to flatulate." At school, little Arnica Péterat is laughed at by her school-mates, who consider her name ridiculous. Fleurissoire's intimate friend is Gaston Blafaphas, whose name suggests blafard, "pale, wan, livid"; alliteration is generally regarded in French unsophisticated or humorous.¹⁰ Fleurissoire and Blafaphas propose almost simultaneously to Arnica, who hesitates, "incapable of deciding between the atrociousness of those two names." She eventually accepts Fleurissoire because he called her Arnice one day, Italian style, which suddenly impressed her with the unsuspected musical richness of her name.¹¹ "The strangeness of the names in the Caves," according to Holdheim, "is an ironic awareness of ideal typicality. 'De Baraglioul' is the comic quintessence of nobility, 'Armand-Dubois' of the hyphenated upper middle class, while poor Fleurissoire cannot escape from the relentless vegetal symbolism of his patronymic. And when a girl has the misfortune of being called 'venite qua,' what can she do except become a prostitute?"

Among other characters of the Caves are Countess Valentine de Saint-Prix, "holy prize or price," who is swindled by Protos and whose name, as Holdheim notes, is "financially religious,"¹² and the various "uncles" of Lafcadio during his youth, i.e., his mother's lovers, among whom are Heldenbruck, "bridge of the hero," and Ardengo Baldi, whose name suggests "ardent" and "bawdy."¹³ Gide's humorous word play with proper names may also be seen in the name Blafaphoire--a combination of Blafaphas and Fleurissoire fabricated by acquaintances of the two friends because of their close relationship, and Léovichon--a combination of Levy and Cohen created by the jeweler Albert Lévy when he married the daughter of the jeweler, M. Cohen, in order to symbolize the union of the two houses.¹⁴

In Les Faux-monnayeurs, Bernard Profitendieu, whose given name etymologically means "bold bear," having learned from some old love letters of his mother that he is in reality an illegitimate son, leaves a letter for M. Profitendieu in which he announces that he is leaving home. "I am signing," he writes, with the ridiculous name that is yours, that I would like to be able to return to you, and that I long to dishonor." The name Profitendieu, "advantage in God," suggests pious overtones that M. Profitendieu later seems to confirm when he seeks to console his wife on the flight of Bernard, trying to "bend that stubborn spirit toward more pious feelings. 'That is the expiation,'" he says.¹⁵ Bernard, after many new experiences, has a nightlong struggle with an angel, or demon, and finally returns to his adoptive father's house, presumably reaccepting the family name. A. H. Pasco and Wilfred Rollman note that when Jacob struggled with the angel in Genesis, he was given the name Israel, meaning "prevail with God."

Bernard's friend is the gentle, peace-loving Olivier Molinier; the olive has traditionally been a sign of peace. The name Molinier suggests mol or mou, meaning "soft, weak," characteristics that seem to apply to the entire family. Molinier also suggests moulinier, "a silk-thrower"; "although not central," Pasco and Rollman note, "the Moliniers are indeed essential to throwing the apparently disparate strands into the main plot-thread." Olivier's brother, Vincent, whose name means "conquering," is one of the weakest in the family and eventually turns mad after killing

his mistress, Lady Griffith; the choice of his name thus seems ironic. Lady Griggith suggests griffes, "claws," an appropriate symbol for this egocentric and unscrupulous character.

The novelist Édouard, who is in some respects Gide's spokesman, has a name which means etymologically "guardian," a role he fulfills toward the Molinier family, as well as toward Bernard and Laura Douviers.¹⁶ The name of his rival, Robert de Passavant, may come from pas savant, "not wise," or pas se avant, "go in front," a reference, as Painter notes, to his superficiality or his opportunism. The leading man on an oar in a French galley of the seventeenth century was known as a pas se-avant. Robert de Passavant is connected with a literary group known as the Argonautes, who take their name from the heroes in Jason's expedition for the golden fleece.

Painter sees in Passavant elements of Count Robert de Montesquiou, the original of Proust's Charlus, but especially a "banalized version of the seemingly meretricious but in fact genuinely golden genius of Cocteau."¹⁷ Justin O'Brien notes that pas se-avant was the war cry of Proust's Guermantes family. Robert de Passavant need not be taken as a caricature of Proust, but Gide may have been struck by the "aristocratic implications" of this cry; "at most, it may be that Gide half-consciously enjoyed borrowing from 'that master of dissimulation' the name of his master-counterfeiter."¹⁸

Strouvilhou, the ringleader of the small group of adolescent counterfeiters, has a name that suggests trou vil, "vile hole," plus hou, a cry of reprobation or an imitation of the call of the wolf or the owl. Ghéridanisol is the adolescent criminal who plots the murder of Boris; Pasco and Rollman suggest the etymology guéri dans le sol, "cured in the ground," i.e., there is no hope for him while he is alive.¹⁹ According to Painter, the first part of the name, Ghérida-, is an anagram of Radiguet, the youthful author of Le Diable au corps and the intimate friend of Cocteau, who died in 1923 at the age of twenty.²⁰

L'Immoraliste opens with a quotation from Psalms: "I will praise thee, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made." The allusion to the anti-hero, Michel, whose name etymologically means "God-like," is obviously satirical, for Michel is an egoist who becomes obsessed with self-love. If the novel can be viewed as an opposition of light and darkness, Marceline, Michel's wife, represents light; her name is derived from Mars, which ultimately comes from a Sanskrit word meaning "beam of light." The first Arab boy Marceline introduces to Michel is Bachir, whose name in Arabic means "messenger." Playing with the boy, the gravely ill Michel exclaims: "I want to live." The next boy introduced to Michel is Ashour, whose name means "make a sign, beckon," i.e., he continues the work begun by Bachir of summoning Michel back to life. Moktir, whose name means "dangerous, risky," or perhaps "daring, bold," is the boy who exerts the greatest influence over Michel. Michel ultimately confesses his misdeeds to friends named Denis and Daniel. Denis is derived from Dionysos, representing desire or chaos, while Daniel means "judgment of God."²¹

The hero of La Porte étroite is Jérôme Palissier, whose given name suggests St. Jerome, famous for his erudition and chastity, and whose family name suggests the verb palisser, "to nail up a vine," or the noun palissade, "palisade, wooden fence, stockade." The name Palissier thus aptly reflects the garden imagery of the novel, as well as the psychological walls that Jérôme cannot penetrate because Alissa has rejected his love in favor of her own love of God, which excludes all earthly love.²²

Gide's use of names appropriate for the images and themes of his narrative thus seems quite evident. His onomastics is an integral part of his literary technique and his quest for perfection.

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FOOTNOTES

¹W. Wolfgang Holdheim, Theory and Practice of the Novel, A Study on André Gide (Geneva, Droz, 1968), p. 200.

²Justin O'Brien, Portrait of André Gide, a Critical Biography (New York, McGraw Hill, 1964), p. 76.

³Holdheim, pp. 175-176.

⁴Holdheim, pp. 214-215.

⁵John Keith Anderson, "Les Caves du Vatican and Bergson's Le Rire," PMLA, March 1969, p.334; A. H. Pasco and Wilfred J. Rollman, "The Artistry of Gide's Onomastics," Modern Language Notes, May 1971, p. 526.

⁶Justin O'Brien, "Lafcadio and Barnabooth, a Supposition," Symposium, Summer 1954, p. 33. The possible derivation of Wliuki from velikiy was suggested by Professor Richard E. Wood of Adelphi University.

⁷Atkinson, p. 332.

⁸Holdheim, p. 230.

⁹Pasco, pp. 526-527.

¹⁰Atkinson, pp. 333-334; Pasco, p. 526.

¹¹André Gide, Les Caves du Vatican in Romans, Récits et Soties, Oeuvres lyriques (Paris, Nouvelle Revue Française, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1966), pp. 762-763.

¹²Holdheim, pp. 225-226.

¹³Pasco, p. 527.

¹⁴Gide, Caves, pp. 760-761.

¹⁵Gide, Les Faux-monnayeurs in Romans, pp. 944, 948.

¹⁶Pasco, p. 527.

¹⁷George D. Painter, André Gide, a Critical Biography (New York, Atheneum, 1968), p. 96.

¹⁸O'Brien, Portrait, pp. 282-283.

¹⁹Pasco, p. 527.

²⁰Painter, pp. 95-96.

²¹Pasco, pp. 528-530.

²²Pasco, pp. 524-525.