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ONOMASTICS IN THE WORKS OF FRANZ KAFKA

Elizabeth M. Rajec

It is quite a well known fact that Kafka ascribed an inordinate importance to names in his works. In his novels, as in his short stories, the characters have either peculiarly selected names (some are even hiding camouflaged meanings behind intricately constructed polyglots), or simply appear nameless. Those with names fit the the following four categories:

- 1./ Ingeniously linked morphemes
(odradek, Isbary, etc.)
- 2./ Descriptive names
(Hasterer, Erlanger, etc.)
- 3./ Simple names
(Leni, Pepi, Franz, Karl, Georg, etc.)
- 4./ Initials
(A., K., N., etc.)

Although interpretations on Kafka's usage of names show quite a diversity, nevertheless, a single perspective seems to crystallize concerning his onomastics. Kafka's nomenclature can perhaps best be visualized as an intricately constructed mosaic in

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which most of the time Kafka himself can be depicted. Technically speaking Kafka's unique usage of names throughout his works can be traced as a progressively increasing line which decreases regressively, but at the end returns to the original point of departure: to Kafka himself. "My stories are me" confesses Kafka in a letter.¹ And so are, in most of the cases, his names also.

Samsa, the hero's name of the well known cockroach story "The Metamorphosis", perhaps best illustrates the above point. As an intricately constructed anagram it reveals that Kafka placed the consonants and the vowels into the exact position as they occur in the name Kafka and reinforced this image further by maintaining the identical vowels of his own name:

(C V C C V)

S A M S A

K A F K A

Besides this clever orthographic manipulation, Samsa, as an anagram, becomes even more apparent as a cryptogram as soon as the Czech meaning of 'sam' and 'sa' are revealed. (Please note that Kafka was born in Prague and was quite familiar with the Czech language!). 'Sam' translates as 'alone' and in combination with the reflexive 'sa' (se) 'Samsa' simply means 'alone by himself' in English. Subsequently, the following question seems in order: Doesn't Samsa, the hero, observe, experience, analyse, and even evaluate the consequences of his unusual change on H I M S E L F? Hence-

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forth, Samsa, that is the name of the hero per se constitutes the essential organic element, the Wesenskern on which the entire short story sustains itself!

But Samsa doesn't stand alone as an isolated instance in Kafka's writings. A pattern of similarly constructed names can easily be observed. The most convincing evidence of this anagram versus cryptogram technique can be perceived in the construction of Georg Bendemann, the hero's name in "The Judgement". 'Bende', according to Middle High-German comes from the verb 'bende, gebende' and can be translated as 'to join' or as 'to unite' as for instance in marriage. Thus, the hero's name describes again precisely the essential core of the short story which basically concentrates around a conflict ending in tragedy between father and son in regard to the son's engagement to a girl named Frieda Brandenburg.

Kafka writes on June 2, 1913 to Felice Bauer, to whom he was twice engaged but never married:

Now note this. Georg has the same number of letters as Franz, 'Bendemann' is made up of Bende and Mann, Bende has the same number of letters as Kafka, and the two vowels are also in the same place; out of pity for poor 'Bende', 'Mann' is probably meant to fortify him for his struggles. 'Freida' has the same letters as Felice; it also starts with the same letter; 'Friede' (peace) and 'Glück' (felice, happiness) are also closely related; 'Brändenfeld' owing to 'feld' (field), has some connection with 'Bauer' (husbandman, peasant), and also starts with the same letter. And there are other similar things - all of which, needless to say, I only discovered afterwards.²

Based on above analysis the following pattern of anagrammatic construction can be observed in Kafka's works:³

K A F K A

H A L K A

K A L D A

S A L V A (-tore)

S A M S A

H A R R A (-s)

K A L L A

P A L L A (-s)

V A L L A (-béne)

B E N D E (-lmayer)

B E N D E (-mann)

M E N D E (-l)

R E N N E (-l)

R E N S E

After deploying it a bit further, quite a few additional names seem to fit the pattern. Here are some randomly picked examples:

K A F K A

B U R G E (-l)

G A R D E (-na)

G I L L E (-mann)

K A L M U (-s)

L O B T E (-r)

M I T Z E (-lbach)

N E G R O

R A M S E (-s)

S O R D I (-ni)

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S O R T I (-ni)

Almost all of Kafka's names when investigated in their frame of reference, that is in their contexts, revolve around the essential cores of the works to which they belong. This applies in most of the cases even to the simple names. For instance, Karl isn't just an arbitrarily attached first name to Rossmann. Its primary association can be derived from 'Kerl' which simply means 'hero'. But perhaps the most unusual name to explore a bit might be 'Negro,' the assumed name of Karl Rossmann, the principal character of Amerika. Karl Rossmann is a sixteen year old boy trying to overcome the difficulties of a new immigrant. After experiencing a chain of misfortunes, when asked to identify himself for future employment possibilities, he simply introduces himself as 'Negro.' Besides the fact that the name 'Negro' immediately gives a socio-economic twist to the novel, from the point of view of onomastics it is important to stress that Negro, as a name, has the identical number of letters and the same construction as Kafka's has:

(C V C C V)

N E G R O

K A F K A

But the philosophical magnitude of the adopted name becomes actually apparent in its total complexity only when the original title is pitted against the assumed title given to the novel by Kafka's friend Max Brod. Kafka's intention was - as revealed posthumously in

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his letters and diaries - to entitle his first novel as "Der Verschollene" (The Disappeared). The connotation of the German verb "verschollen" includes, first of all, that a person has vanished or is dead in the eyes of the law; but it also includes the meaning of "earth," "land," "clod," as it does in the German noun "die Scholle." Therefore, metaphorically, the original title; "The Disappeared," encompasses not only the land in which the hero gets lost, but literally the piece of land so very essential for survival under anybody's foot - be it a "scholle", a lump of clod of the old or of the new country. But Karl Rossmann's roots were mercilessly cut off and were never given a chance to thrive again; he disappears as a nameless face into the vastness of Oklahoma. Consequently, the name "Negro" reinforces the appropriateness of the original title, and, as already mentioned in connection with other names, evolves around the essential core of the novel.

'Die Scholle' is not the only noun with more than one meaning in Kafka's works. As a matter of fact names with multi-meanings are quite typical of Kafka's prose. For instance, 'Klamm,' the deputy's name in The Castle, can be translated from the German into English as 'clasp' or 'bracket'. But in the Czech language 'klam' also means 'illusion,' 'lie,' or even 'deliberate deceit.' Needless to say that both meanings fit precisely the central core of the novel: K.'s

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existence as surveyor depends on obtaining the necessary permit which supposedly was granted by the castle's authority but for whatever peculiar reason never reached him. The 'clasping' spell of the castle and its empty 'promises' are cleverly camouflages by the already mentioned names and their hidden meanings are perhaps left for the reader to discover. An additional example of a multi-meaning manipulation is 'Das Schloss' which doesn't only mean 'castle' but it also means 'lock' or 'clasp.' (Please note that it also alludes to 'Klamm'!) Therefore, Das Schloss (The Castle) is a compact title that includes descriptively not only K.'s built-in hopes but also his unavoidable tragic ending.

Kafka's preference for polyglots can perhaps best be illustrated by his own analysis of the name Odradek. 'Rad' (here 'advice' or 'wheel') as a German-Slavic morpheme in the combination with the Slavic prefix 'od-' and the suffix '-ek' can be translated as the one who gives or who needs advice but also the one who terminates, that is, runs off as thread on spool would. But the text of the short story "The Family Man's Worry" explains it best:

Some do say that the work Odradek stems from the Slavic and try to prove the formation of

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of the word accordingly. Others again assume that it stems from the German, it is only influenced by the Slavic. The uncertainty of both interpretations rightly points to the conclusion that neither is correct because neither gives the meaning of the word.

Of course nobody would even bother to study it if a creature named Odradek didn't exist.⁴

Kafka's cleverly constructed cryptograms can be traced in his ornithologic names. 'Kavka' (here spelled with a 'v') is a Czech noun meaning 'jackdaw' in English. And that the Kafka family was quite aware of the meaning of their name can first of all be illustrated by his father's guild-sign hanging in front of his store depicting a black bird, secondly also from a conversation recalled by Kafka's friend Janouch:

'I am a quite impossible bird,' said Franz Kafka.

'I am a jackdaw - a kavka. The coal merchant in the close of the Tein cathedral has one. Have you seen it?'

Yes, it flies about outside his shop.'

'Yes, my relative is better off than I am. It is true, of course, that its wings have been clipped.

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As for me, this was not in any case necessary, as my wings are atrophied. For this reason there are no heights and distances for me. I hop bewildered among my fellow men. They regard me with deep suspicion. And indeed I am a dangerous bird, a thief, a jackdaw. But that is only an illusion. In fact, I lack all feeling for shining objects. For that reason I do not even have glossy black plumage. I am grey, like ash. A jackdaw who longs to disappear between the stones.⁵

Birds, but particularly black birds are very important images in Kafka's writings and can easily be traced in his list of names. In 'Gracchus,' in the hunter's peculiar name of the similarly entitled short story, quite obviously 'die Krahe' (crow) is traceable; in 'Raban,' in the hero's name of the 'Wedding Preparation in the Country' 'der Rabe' (raven); in 'Robinson,' in the good-for-nothing fellow's name of Amerika, the aimlessly hopping 'robin'; in 'Titus' the 'dove'; in 'Kullich' perhaps the 'screech-owl'; in 'Rabenstein' again the 'raven,' and in 'Kaminer' (here 'kamen' translated as 'chimney' but also as 'stone') possibly the 'stonechat' or any kind of a black bird feeling at ease on city chimneys and stone walls.

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The last three names belong to the nomenclature of The Trial and underline with their images quite forcefully the morbid atmosphere of the novel. It is perhaps of some additional interest to point out that linguistically the three names are bilingual in character and represent with their peculiarly linked morphemes the multi-ethnic elements of Kafka's Czech-German-Jewish background. But Kafka is quite consistent with his images. Not only does Josef K., the main character of The Trial, never find out what he has been accused of but, "disappears between the stones," as already mentioned, the jackdaw did. And alas! Josef K. dies forsaken by his friends at the city's stone wall, too. But so do almost all of Kafka's heroes vanish regardless of whether they belong to a completed or an unfinished work.

Almost all of the ornithologic names occurring in Kafka's works are traceable within their frame of reference. Raban, that is 'raven,' is described as a character "hopping from one dry stone to another dry stone;"⁶ or, as reflected in a diary entry, where Kafka perhaps alludes to himself by referring to a small bird (Kamin Vogel) sitting on the edge of a chimney. He even adds that it must be quite an uncommon bird which takes off from a chimney. ("Kein gewöhnlicher Vogel, der aus dem Kamin auf-

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fliegt..")⁷ Thus, animals - besides their primary functions - are also important as images of onomastics even if appearing simply as ravens, eagles, horses, doves, birds, etc.

Obviously not all of the names can be molded into the anagrammatic structure. Nevertheless, when examined within their frame of connotations or associations, most of the names either reflect Kafka's name or appear as intricately constructed buttresses supporting the central core of the particular work to which they belong. For instance, Hasterer becomes quite transparent as a descriptive name since his role is 'to hasten,' 'to rush,' Josef K.'s affairs in The Trial; or Bürgel's name becomes quite obvious as 'burgher' or 'warrant' within the complex system of The Castle; or Butterbaum as an additional disappearing person in Amerika, who literally melted away as a 'tree of butter' would.

It is perhaps of some additional interest to mention that some names hide important messages and become obvious only when properly exposed. Assmann, the name appearing in the short story "The Knock at the Manor Gate," is perhaps a good example. As is well known, Kafka died of TB. The leading medical authority in the field of tuberculosis during Kafka's life was Dr. Herbert Assmann (1882-1950).⁸ From this perspective, the appearance of the name

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Assmann in such close connection with his own fatal sickness' seems quite possible. It can be reinforced by terms from the short story which reflect the inner struggle of a person feeling "threatened," "terrified," perceiving "warning signs," and eventually envisioning an "operating table."⁹ Or in Blumfeld, the principal character's name of the short story "Blumfeld, an Elderly Bachelor," perhaps the famous lawyer Hermann Fadeevich Blumenfeld (1861-1920) is traceable,¹⁰ who, besides being the defense lawyer of the Kishinev Trial is also known as an expert surveyor.¹¹ To emphasize the line pointing to Kafka, the lawyer, or K., the surveyor, seems unnecessary.

Basically, the letter 'K' is accepted as Kafka's trademark by now, and that in spite of the fact that the interpretations vary from the autobiographical assumption that 'K' = Kafka to the notion that 'K' = Christ. From an onomastics point of view it is actually of secondary importance whether 'K' stands for either or both, but what does matter is the fact that the letter 'K' occurs in all major works. In his novels, for instance, the letter 'K' appears first in Karl, the hero's first name in "The Stoker," later also published as the first chapter of Amerika. It appears again in The Trial, in the identification of Josef K., in the main character's name. This form of attenuation can also

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be traced in the short story "The Dream," where the identically named hero Josef K., experiences a vision in which the letters of his name are dancing in shimmering gold above his own grave. And finally in The Castle where the hero's identity - usually associated with a name - appears reduced to the initial: K:

In summary: the letter 'K' can be considered as an onomastics point of departure but at the same time as the point around which the line of the Kafka profile is circling and to which it is ultimately returning. Basically, in almost all of the names - be they anagrams, cryptograms, or peculiarly linked morphemes camouflaged even further as complex polyglots - Kafka himself is traceable. Perhaps there is no other modern writer who was so cabalistically possessed by names but particularly by his own name. Permit me to conclude with a diary entry where Kafka confesses as follows: "I find the K's ugly, they are repugnant to me and yet I write them, they must be very characteristic of me."¹²

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NOTES

¹ Franz Kafka, Letters to Felice. Ed. by E. Heller and J. Böm. Tr. by J. Stern and E. Duckworth (New York: Schocken, 1973), p. 183.

² Ibid., p. 265.

³ Elizabeth M. Rajec, Namen und ihre Bedeutungen im Werke Franz Kafkas. Ein interpretatorischer Versuch (Bern: Lang, 1977), pp. 183-4.

⁴ Franz Kafka, Sämtliche Erzählungen. Ed. by P. Raabe (New York: Schocken, 1957), p. 157. (Passages tr. by E. Rajec)

⁵ Gustav Janouch, Conversations with Kafka. Tr. by G. Rees. 2nd ed. rev. and enl. (Frankfurt: Fischer, 1968), pp. 16-7.

⁶ Kafka, Sämtliche Erzählungen, op. cit., p. 273.

⁷ Franz Kafka, Tagebücher 1910-1923, Ed. by M. Brod (New York: Schocken, 1967), p. 363.

⁸ Leo Hantschmann, "Herbert Assmann, Arzt," Neue deutsche Biographie (Berlin: Duncker, 1953), v. 1, pp. 419-20.

⁹ Franz Kafka, Shorter Works. Tr. and ed. by M. Pasley (London: Secker, 1973), v. 1, p. 77.

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¹⁰ David B(ar)-R(av)-H(ay), "Hermann Fadeevich Blumenfeld," Encyclopedia Judaica (Jersulaem, Macmillan, 1971), v. 4, p. 1140.

¹¹ Elizabeth M. Rajec, "Kafkas Erzählung 'Blumfeld, ein älterer Junggeselle'," Beiträge zur Namenforschung, 11 (1976), p. 468.

¹² Kafka, Tagebücher, op. cit., p. 268.