

## MYSTERY

believe, that "Mrs Bathurst" is not essentially a mystery story at all, in the usual sense of that term, but a tragedy. The quotation from *Hamlet* that is Vickery's last recorded speech ("The rest is silence"), it") in his earlier statement, "You've only had to watch. I'm it," are among several allusions to high tragedy in the story. Here, as elsewhere, Kipling shows that ordinary humble people, who drop their atches and have ill-fitting dentures, are nevertheless capable of intense emotions, violent passions and crippling guilt; and that the greatest mystery of all is the human heart.

## 8 Names

... and a girl you have not yet been introduced to, who now comes forward from the shadows of the side aisle, where she has been lurking, to join the others at the altar rail. Let her be called Violet, no, Veronica, no Violet, improbable a name as that is for Catholic girls of Irish extraction, customarily named after saints and figures of Celtic legend, for I like the connotations of Violet - shrinking, penitential, melancholy - a diminutive, dark-haired girl, a pale, pretty face ravaged by eczema, fingernails bitten down to the quick and stained by nicotine, a smartly cut needlecord coat sadly creased and soiled; a girl, you might guess from all this evidence, with problems, guilts, hangups.

DAVID LODGE *How Far Can You Go?* (1980)

And there, for the time being, let us leave Vic Wilcox, while we travel back an hour or two in time, a few miles in space, to meet a very different character. A character who, rather awkwardly for me, doesn't herself believe in the concept of character. That is to say (a favourite phrase of her own), Robyn Penrose, Temporary Lecturer in English Literature at the University of Rummidge, holds that "character" is a bourgeois myth, an illusion created to reinforce the ideology of capitalism.

DAVID LODGE *Nice Work* (1988)

"In that case," he said, "I'm happy to oblige you. My name is Quinn."

"Ah," said Stillman reflectively, nodding his head. "Quinn."

"Yes, Quinn, Q-U-I-N-N."

"I see. Yes, yes, I see. Quinn. Hmmm. Yes. Very interesting. Quinn. A most resonant word. Rhymes with twin, does it not?"

"That's right. Twin."

"And sin, too, if I'm not mistaken."

"You're not."

"And also in - one n - or inn - two. Isn't that so?"

"Exactly."

"Hmmm. Very interesting. I see many possibilities for this word, this Quinn, this . . . quinescence . . . of quiddity. Quick, for example. And quill. And quack. And quirk. Hmmm. Rhymes with grin. Not to speak of kin. Hmmm. Very interesting. And rhymes with djinn. Hmmm. And if you say it right, with been. Hmmm. Yes, very interesting. I like your name enormously, Mr. Quinn. It flies off in so many little directions at once."

"Yes, I've often noticed that myself."

PAUL AUSTER *City of Glass* (1985)

ONE OF THE FUNDAMENTAL principles of structuralism is "the arbitrariness of the sign", the idea that there is no necessary, existential connection between a word and its referent. Not "rightly is they called pigs," as the man said, but by linguistic chance. Other words serve the same purpose in other languages. As Shakespeare observed, anticipating Ferdinand de Saussure by three centuries, "a rose by any other name would smell as sweet."

Proper names have an odd and interesting status in this respect. Our first names are usually given to us with semantic intent, having for our parents some pleasant or hopeful association which we may or may not live up to. Surnames however are generally perceived as arbitrary, whatever descriptive force they may once have had. We don't expect our neighbour Mr Shepherd to look after sheep, or mentally associate him with that occupation. If he is a character in a novel, however, pastoral and perhaps biblical associations will inevitably come into play. One of the great mysteries of literary history is what exactly the supremely respectable Henry James meant by calling one of his characters Fanny Assingham.

In a novel names are never neutral. They always signify, if it is only ordinairness. Comic, satiric or didactic writers can afford to be exuberantly inventive, or obviously allegorical, in their naming (Thwackum, Pumblechook, Pilgrim). Realistic novelists favour mundane names with appropriate connotations (Emma Woodhouse, Adam Bede). The naming of characters is always an important part of creating them, involving many considerations, and hesitations, which I can most conveniently illustrate from my own experience.

The question in the title *How Far Can You Go?* applies to both the undermining of traditional religious belief by radical theology and the undermining of literary convention by the device of "breaking frame", which I referred to earlier in connection with the intrusive authorial voice (see Section 2). For an author to openly change his mind about the name of a character, in mid-text, is a particularly blatant admission that the whole story is "made up", something readers know but usually suppress, as religious believers suppress their doubts. Nor is it customary for novelists to explain the connotations of the names they give to their characters: such suggestions are supposed to work subliminally on the reader's consciousness.

The invention of the word processor has made it easy to change the name of a character at a late stage of composition, just by touching a few keys, but I would have a strong resistance to doing that to any but the most minor character in my fiction. One may hesitate and agonize about the choice of a name, but once made, it becomes inseparable from the character, and to question it seems to throw the whole project *en abîme*, as the deconstructionists say. I was made acutely aware of this in the process of writing *Nice Work*.

This novel concerns the relationship between the managing director of an engineering company and a young academic who is obliged to "shadow" him. Although it contains some frame-breaking asides, as the quotation above illustrates, it is generally a more straightforwardly realistic novel than *How Far Can You Go?* and in naming the characters I was looking for names that would seem "natural" enough to mask their symbolic appropriateness. I

named the man Vic Wilcox to suggest, beneath the ordinariness and Englishness of the name, a rather aggressive, even coarse masculinity (by association with *victor*, *mill* and *cock*), and I soon settled on Penrose for the surname of my heroine for its contrasting connotations of literature and beauty (*pen* and *rose*). I hesitated for some time, however, about the choice of her first name, vacillating between Rachel, Rebecca and Roberta, and I remember that this held up progress on Chapter Two considerably, because I couldn't imaginatively inhabit this character until her name was fixed. Eventually I discovered in a dictionary of names that Robin or Robyn is sometimes used as a familiar form of Roberta. An androgynous name seemed highly appropriate to my feminist and assertive heroine, and immediately suggested a new twist to the plot: Wilcox would be expecting a male Robin to turn up at his factory.

About halfway through writing the novel I realized that I had selected for Vic, perhaps by the same mental route as E. M. Forster, the surname of the chief male character in *Howards End*, Henry Wilcox – another man of business who becomes enamoured of an intellectual woman. Rather than change my hero's name, I incorporated *Howards End* into the intertextual level of the novel, emphasizing the parallels between the two books – by, for instance, the legend on the tee-shirt of Robyn's student, Marion, "ONLY CONNECT" (the epigraph to Forster's novel), Marion, "ONLY Perhaps because she is a "maid" whose innocence and virtue Robyn (cf. Robin Hood) is anxious to protect, perhaps because the young, as it were potential, George Eliot (who figures prominently in Robyn's teaching) was called Marian Evans. I say "perhaps" because authors are not always conscious of their motivation in these matters.

The passage quoted from Paul Auster's *City of Glass*, one of the three remarkable novellas that make up his *New York Trilogy*, pushes the connotative significance of names in literary texts to an absurdist extreme. These three stories subject the clichés and stereotypes of the gumshoe detective story to a postmodernist scepticism about identity, causality and meaning. Quinn himself

writes detective stories under the name of William Wilson, which happens to be the name of the eponymous hero of Poe's famous tale about a man in pursuit of his *Doppelgänger* (see Section 47). Misidentified as "Paul Auster of the Auster Detective Agency", Quinn is seduced into acting the part, tailing a former professor called Stillman who has recently been released from prison and is feared by the client of Quinn, alias Wilson, alias Auster. Stillman has written a book in which he concludes that the arbitrariness of the sign was a consequence of Original Sin.

Adam's one task in the Garden had been to invent language, to give each creature and thing its name. In that state of innocence, his tongue had gone straight to the quick of the world. His words had not been merely appended to the things he saw, they had revealed their essences, had literally brought them to life. A thing and its name were interchangeable. After the fall, this was no longer true. Names became detached from things; words devolved into a collection of arbitrary signs; language had been severed from God. The story of the Garden, therefore, not only records the fall of man, but the fall of language.

As if to demonstrate the point, Stillman deconstructs Quinn's name, when they eventually meet, with a flow of whimsical free association. The connotations of Quinn stop nowhere, and therefore become useless to the reader as an interpretative key.

In the second story, *Ghosts*, all the characters have the names of colours.

First of all there is Blue. Later there is White, and then there is Black, and before the beginning there is Brown. Brown broke him in, Brown taught him the ropes, and when Brown grew old, Blue took over. That is how it begins . . . The case seems simple enough. White wants Blue to follow a man named Black and to keep an eye on him for as long as possible.

By this manifestly artificial naming system, Auster again affirms the arbitrariness of language, introducing it (arbitrariness) where it doesn't usually belong (fictional names). In the third story, *The*

NAMES

*Locked Room*, the narrator confesses how he faked government census returns, parodying the activity of a novelist:

Most of all there was the pleasure of making up names. At times I had to curb my impulse towards the outlandish – the fiercely comical, the pun, the dirty word – but for the most part I was content to play within the bounds of realism.

In all three stories the impossibility of pinning the signifier to the signified, of recovering that mythical, prelapsarian state of innocence in which a thing and its name were interchangeable, is replicated on the level of plot by the futility of the routines of detection. Each narrative ends with the death or despair of the detective-figure, faced with an insoluble mystery, lost in a labyrinth of names.

## 9 The Stream of Consciousness

Mrs Dalloway said she would buy the flowers herself. For Lucy had her work cut out for her. The doors would be taken off their hinges; Rumpelmayer's men were coming. And then, thought Clarissa Dalloway, what a morning – fresh as if issued to children on a beach.

What a lark! What a plunge! For so it had always seemed to her when, with a little squeak of the hinges, which she could hear now, she had burst open the French windows and plunged at Bourton into the open air. How fresh, how calm, stiller than this of course, the air was in the early morning; like the flap of a wave; the kiss of a wave; chill and sharp and yet (for a girl of eighteen as she then was) solemn, feeling as she did, standing there at the open window, that something awful was about to happen; looking at the flowers, at the trees with the smoke winding off them and the rooks rising, falling; standing and looking until Peter Walsh said, "Musing among the vegetables?" – was that it? – "I prefer men to cauliflowers" – was that it? He must have said it at breakfast one morning when she had gone out on to the terrace – Peter Walsh. He would be back from India one of these days, June or July, she forgot which, for his letters were awfully dull; it was his sayings one remembered; his eyes, his pocket-knife, his smile, his grumpiness and, when millions of things had utterly vanished – how strange it was! – a few sayings like this about cabbages.

VIRGINIA WOOLF *Mrs Dalloway* (1925)