

Naming

by Aristide Tronconi*

In mid-December 2007 the newspapers reported that the Genoa Court of Appeal had upheld a ruling by a Law Court which prohibited a couple in Nervi from naming their son *Venerdì* [Friday]. An Italian law passed in 2000 actually bans the use of names judged to be ridiculous or shameful. The judges of the Court of Appeal argued that *Venerdì* could easily be associated with Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, in which the wild *Man Friday* is in a position of subjection and inferiority. The parents insisted that *Robinson Crusoe* had nothing to do with the matter. They pointed out they intended to call their second child *Mercoledì* [Wednesday]. Their intention was to escape from conventional patterns of thought by choosing an unusual name, one that would be free from preconceptions, as they claimed, or other meanings.

Professor M. Bacigalupo, Professor of American Literature at the University of Genoa, interviewed in *La Repubblica* (Intervista a M. Bacigalupo, 2007), asserted that it was specious to associate the name with the fictional character. He was reported as saying: "Given all the characters that populate the minds of young people today, I don't know how many will have read the novel".

It may be that the parents knew nothing of Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, but even if they had heard of him directly or indirectly, how likely were they to associate Friday with ideas of subjugation and inferiority? Defoe presents Friday in a fairly positive light as shrewd and intelligent. Hence J. J. Rousseau took him an example of the noble savage, of man as naturally good. *Friday* and Robinson form a relationship of sincere friendship and mutual respect. Because *Robinson* saved his life, *Friday* agrees to serve him, out of a sense of gratitude, but without seeing himself as a slave.

What about the countless imitations of the book and all the remakes, including some works of real merit? One example is Michel Tournier's *Vendredi ou les Limbes du Pacifique* (1967). In this novel the "savage" converts the bourgeois to a more primitive and fulfilling way of life. And what about the films inspired by the novel, from Buñuel's *Las Aventuras de Robinson Crusoe* (1952) to *Man Friday* (1975), starring Peter O'Toole, in which *Friday* tries in vain to educate the shipwrecked white man, shown as a typical representative of imperialist England?

It is certainly very difficult, as we can see from these examples, to argue with any confidence that *Friday* as a person's name generates one set of associations rather than another. There is a risk in such cases of superimposing one's own culture and mental associations on other people's ideas, about which we know little. In deciding to name their children after the days of the week the parents from Nervi were giving them access to the bizarre, the unusual. Perhaps they wanted children who, like or unlike themselves, would have an opportunity to grow up free from conventional ideas. Though one certainly wonders what could be more conventional and repetitive than a day of the week.

I think these observations are also relevant to the choices writers make when they name the characters in their novels. Orhan Pamuk spoke at the encounter *Aperitivo con gli autori*, coordinated by Dino Messina and organized by the Corriere della Sera at La Milanese, 2007 (Orhan Pamuk: il segreto della letteratura, 2007). Among other things he observed: "We have to start from the assumption that writer and reader think and imagine different things" I wholly agree with this statement. The central character in Pamuk's novel *The New Life* is called Osman. Can we ask why he has this name? Pamuk does not say why, or suggest a reason. The name may have been chosen at random or carefully calculated. It may contain a conscious allusion or have been quite unconscious. We do not know and probably never will. The fact remains that the reader can enrich the significance of this choice of name by trying to come closer to the author's culture and

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mindset and making assumptions that need to keep within the bounds of discretion, since a perfect convergence of views and mental states is possible only in the world of the imagination. As for the name Osman, I think one relevant point is that it is similar in sound and spelling to Orhan. "I have in all honesty believed that two people who have similar names must have similar characters" (Pamuk, 2003, p. 84) writes Pamuk in *Istanbul*. That the author identifies with his characters, putting something of himself into them, can almost be taken for granted. "When I wrote *My Name is Red*, I forced myself, compelled myself, to identify with the characters," said Pamuk. This could also mean the opposite, namely that he forced something of himself onto the nine characters in the novel. In the same way it would be easy to see Osman in *The New Life* as the university student that Orhan once was.

The confrontation between two worlds, East and West, identified in *My Name is Red* with the two schools of miniature, is represented by Uncle Effendi and Master Osman. Again the name Osman appears. Here he is the character who defends the East, who believes it is right to follow tradition and represent in a miniature not what the eye sees but what God sees. Uncle Effendi, by contrast, is fascinated by the techniques of Western painters.

Again in *Istanbul* Pamuk wrote: "From a very young age I suspected there was more to my world than I could see: Somewhere in the streets of Istanbul, in a house resembling ours, there lived another Orhan so much like me that he could pass for my twin, even my double" (p.3). I think this twin could be Osman. In the psychological sense we can understand the imaginary twin as his soul mate, or a complementary part of himself. Not necessarily identical but certainly necessary if he is to feel complete, to render more clearly the sense of duality that Pamuk and others feel is a part of their identity. The same yet different, one yet divided, so that the ego can find, in the alternation between twins, a way to express itself, to transcend that sense of wholeness and uniqueness that social needs and relationships demand. The name each of us has, which is given to us or which we give ourselves, cannot be truly representative of our identity, the myriad of conscious and unconscious identifications on which it is based.

Fernando Riolo states: "Identity proceeds from a continuous exchange between inner and outer, from a series of inclusions and exclusions, which find a locus of temporary integration within it. This locus is therefore not intended as a peaceful cohabitation between parts in a complementary relationship, but as a conflicting and irreducible plurality, in which the aspiration to unity is continually subverted by the aspiration of its parts to exist" (Riolo, 2007, p. 899).

Towards the end of *The New Life* Osman meets the man he regards as his rival and discovers that he too had recently taken the name Osman, whereas previously he called himself Mehmet and before that Nahit. "I couldn't decide whether I should call [my rival] Nahit, or Mehmet, or Osman," (Pamuk, 1995, p. 224) the protagonist informs us. Each name embodies something of himself. How could he reduce his identity to a single representation?

"The ego - according to Riolo - is *per se* an empty form, which can be variously filled by successive waves of representations and identifications. It is not an institution, but the chosen signifier of a stage inhabited by multiple meanings" (Riolo, 2007, p. 899).

Pamuk's whole novel unfolds in accordance with multiple meanings. *The New Life* is the name of the sweets Osman found in his pocket as a child, but also the title of the book that fascinated him most in youth. Its significance was related to a life that was "ordered, disciplined and punctual" (Pamuk, 1995, p. 183), but also its opposite. "I had only wanted to return home, I absolutely had no wish for death, nor for crossing over into the new life", Osman reflects (p. 296).

Even the angel, a figure initially conceived as stolen from a European magazine, turns out to be the symbolic representation of "Angel Candy and Chewing Gum", as well as "a hybrid between a Persian miniature and a domestic film star" (p. 203) plastered across a circus tent. Representing the flowing of life, pleasure and sensuousness, of health that needs to be protected, it also becomes an emblem of approaching death. "It might be that you behold the angel at the moment of death, in the window of a bus" thinks Osman (p. 217).

During the encounter at the Milanese mentioned above (Orhan Pamuk: *il segreto della letteratura*, 2007), Pamuk declared: "Many things are hidden, buried in us, and we don't know

whether we are capable of expressing them. In writing, we look for details and gestures that will represent us and that everyone will recognize, but which we're afraid or unable to express."

In *What is Called Thinking* M. Heidegger quotes some lines from Hölderlin's hymn *Mnemosyne*: "We are a sign that is not read. / We feel no pain and we almost have/lost our tongue in foreign lands" (Heidegger, 1971, p. 18). He uses this passage to explain that not everything we are and know can be conveyed in the language we speak. A part of us, of our existence, is hidden, as if in exile, remaining devoid of interpretation, as a sign that stands for nothing (p. 110). This is why poetic creativity, artistic in the broad sense we might say, more than any other kind creates an opening onto this world, which has not yet translated, or has failed to translate, its significance into a universally codifiable communication.

In his poem *Nominazione*, Mario Luzi (1998) wrote: "The shadows of things shrink / and places hide / in their light ... And yet they develop /knowing and unknowing, / and perfect them. / But heart and meaning / are lost". The encounter between what the writers leaves unsaid and what the reader tells him and others about what is unsaid ultimately gives rise to new thoughts. These presumed new truths lend significance to action and comfort to the heart, antidotes to that sense of bewilderment that Heidegger sees at the foundation of human life. Luzi's (1998) poem continues: "The scribe / writes / what has been written from all time / yet never finished / never said truly./ Who rouses those seeds, / who animates that firmament?[...] Unsaid. Unsaid / and unsayable. It played / to hide itself / from names. Came / and went amid the clouds / of our understanding / unscathed / slipped from the nets / cast by the scribes".

Filling a void of meaning, interpreting the signs and choices of others, is not, as S. Freud supposed, an archaeological operation, based on the assumption that there exists a historical truth to be delved into or dredged up from the unconscious. Making a distinction between narrative truth and historical truth (Spence, 1982), today psychoanalysis conceives the encounter with the Other who speaks of himself/herself as a creative encounter, based on the construction of meanings that intersect and mingle, provisionally complementing each other and stemming from the profound needs of both, which are not always communicable and not always conscious.

It does us good to meet someone else confidentially, to read a good book or listen to good music. These encounters give us access to a new reality, one that has the flavour of the past yet is not limited to it, since there are always open spaces that are temporarily populated by forgotten or unexpected emotions and knowledge, by more or less shared arbitrary inferences, by additional reflections which give meaning to our expectations and the passing of time.

"At times - thought Osman - sometimes I sensed that the books I read in rapid succession had set up some sort of murmur among themselves, transforming my head into an orchestra pit where different musical instruments sounded out, and I would realize that I could endure life because of these musicales going on in my head" (Pamuk, 1995, p.244).

If we follow Pamuk's musical analogy, we can understand the art of writing as an orchestral product crystallized through the years, which seeks to achieve a written order in order to spell out its meaning. Its richness, which fosters endurance, is based on instruments and musical scores that play different pieces of music, or the same pieces but with different timbres. The ego focuses its attention variously on the nearest or farthest instrument, on high notes or low notes, even on dissonances. Imperfections in the rendering lead to arbitrariness, but they also reflect the urgency expressed in a note, a rhythm, a break in style or coherence. It seems to me that an example of this is the statement we find in the middle of Pamuk's novel: "Love means never having to say you are sorry" (p. 244). The words were originally spoken by Jennifer (Ali McGraw) to Oliver Barrett (Ryan O'Neal), the central characters in the film *Love Story*, scripted by E. Segal, who also wrote the novel that became a bestseller at the time.

We can attain truth of being, according to Heidegger, by waiting silently, shutting away the noise of idle talk and inauthentic speech, ignoring stereotypes and gossip, refusing to heed rumours and platitudes. Yet human beings are also like this: a mixture of true and false, authentic and imitative, personal and collective, original and repetitive. When Jenny's phrase appears in the novel at that point, it blurs the beauty of the narrative which Pamuk usually succeeds in weaving around his characters and the events that happen to them. But in this way he make the reader aware that we are imperfect, sometimes influenced by cultures that are not always fresh, useful or healthy. That phrase, which so grated amid the pleasure of reading, was a reminder that there also exists a

certain language, a certain way of communicating, a certain profit. *Love Story* was Paramount's biggest-ever success at the time. It received seven Academy Award nominations and was a cult movie of the seventies.

Heidegger maintains that speech needs to be closely related to the listener. He states that the ability to write presupposes the ability to listen. The poet spends most of his time not in writing but listening. Even thinking cannot be separated from listening, provided we immerse ourselves in listening, letting others speak to us. This is not thinking in a calculating or calculated way, nor the kind of thinking manifested in idle talk or empty curiosity, nor even the thinking of science, which catalogues and defines everything. This means we have to distinguish between different ways of thinking; but it might not always be so, because at times you find your own thoughts were originally someone else's. Even chatting and asking can be valuable: the one tones down dramas, while the other placates the anxiousness of our searching.

Pamuk's outstanding quality lies precisely in this mixture of necessity and reality, beauty and alienation. He orchestrates books and authors, philosophers, historians and other writers in his mind and each of them whispers something to him, an idea, a belief, an escape route. This renders very clearly the way I believe the human mind is and functions. "Things and names, each in its own / desolate orphanhood, / search for each other. / Where? / In the mind / that held them together, / or in what / other uniqueness?" (M. Luzi, 1998, *Nominazione*).

We can now return to *Venerdì* or Friday, looking for other possible motives that might have influenced his parents' choice of a name, or rather seeking to infer freely from some other data the significance of a gesture of apparently little importance. Apart from referring to Defoe's novel, in handing down their judgment the justices added that it is widely known that Friday as a day of the week is associated with popular and religious beliefs. It is a day of sadness and penitence, of fasting for the Catholic Church. It is popularly considered an unlucky day, especially (in Italy) Friday the 17th.

It seems to me that what most impressed and troubled the judges might have been a variation on the conventional wisdom about childbirth. It is generally thought of as an event that is joyous, and nothing but joyous. But as a day of the week, Friday reminds us that there sadness and sacrifice also exist. Like all important human events, birth can prompt ambiguous feelings. It entails the loss of the intense and mysterious unity between mother and child during pregnancy, when one is highly dependent on the other both physically and psychically.

Franco Fornari (1981), who wrote several books on the profound psychic experience of the moment of childbirth, actually thought that the mother, as she struggles with the birth pangs, feels an atrocious sense of persecution. He quotes Leopardi's *Night Song of a Wandering Shepherd of Asia*, which declares: "Man is born in labour / and risks death as he is born" (p. 270). We might also add the closing lines: "Whatever its state, whether in cradle or sheepfold, the day of birth is dark to the one that is born".

The fact that sometimes a woman or both parents will decide to have an abortion is another variant on the alleged sense of happiness and fulfilment that a child's birth means for a family. Financial or health reasons are often adduced to explain this choice, as if there were an emotional impediment, a sense of profound shame about admitting that there may be no external reasons that lead people to choose an abortion. It may in fact be principally due to intensely ambivalent feelings. The thought of a child as a cause for joy can be combined with the thought of a child as a misfortune, arousing sentiments of fear and grief.

Probably none of these feelings occurred to the parents in Nervi. Their gesture may have been an expression of imaginative, cultural and emotional poverty, not just an unconscious ambivalence intuitively grasped by the court and translated, as is its function, into the legal position which enforced the need to respect a collective morality which defends shared values as they are socially understood and expressed. It is no accident that the suggestion made to the parents, in the absence of an alternative name, was to call the child Gregorio, since it was born on September 3, the feast day of St. Gregory.

Thus I cannot agree with Fornari (1979) when he states that there is always a significance, manifest and latent, in every communication expressed in language. He fails to consider the possibility that the mind is not always so rich, traversed by symbols and emotional conflicts that its

contents have to be expressed in communication. Sometimes what it conveys is no more than what it is, namely absence, affective and cognitive poverty, stemming in part from psychic levels most remote from consciousness. In fact language sometimes makes up for an inner emptiness which is not easily recognized.

The modern world, Heidegger argued, is a time of poverty; a time when man is moved only by the bustle of business and commerce, dominated by the noise of words, chatter and curiosity. A poverty, I would add, which is sometimes irksome because of the lack of emotional, ethical or social depth, the absence of specific symbols and the arrest of mental fluidity.

"I sometimes wonder - writes Riolo - where the neuroses there once existed have got to. Neuroses are the expressions of a world that centred on psychic reality and its significances: desire, prohibition, conflict, impotence, passion, guilt. The pathologies that have taken their place are rather the expression of a deficiency in the symbolic order and the normalization of actions whose purpose is to evacuate anxiety but also the significance of the self (Riolo, 2008, p. 902).

After all, the judges in the *Venerdi* case may have done the parents a service by giving a meaning to their actions, creating an abundance of affects, because ambivalence inevitably rests on affectivity. Something similar happens to psychoanalysts in their efforts to understand and interpret. Humanity has an urgent need to anchor its actions to possible feelings, anxieties and difficulties, creating an abundance of communication so as to curb the opposite misgiving, that we might have nothing to say.

Venerdi's mother said in an interview for the *Strange Days* column in "Mente Critica"[Critical Mind] that family and friends will "continue to call him by that name, because now he's used to it and I think the change would be a shock" (Di venere e di marte, 2007). But do her words really suggest a maternal anxiety for a possible trauma to the child? And the anxiety expressed by the court, surely excessive, is also misleading when the judges suggest her son might suffer from mockery by his peers when he is older.

Getting at the affective roots of that name may not be possible, because it may not have any root. An attempt to put down roots may emerge following the judges' decision, to the extent that the mother is promising to do everything in the way of petitions and appeals to enable the child to continue to be called by the name she chose. The judges have unwittingly created an opportunity for her to activate an internal emotional problematic around an external event, in which the child begins to be presented as the focus of attention.

In the same way we can assume there is always something more to be heard, to be added, to be clarified, in addition to the information freely volunteered by the patient. The psychoanalyst by his or her actions, doubts and questions, enriches a narrative that can sometimes be originally poor in symbols, in affect, in manifest and latent significance. Certainly this enables the patient to glimpse that possibility, during the path of analysis and through the relationship with the analyst, that the desert, though remaining such, will become studded with a few oases, where water and vegetation will make life more tolerable.

In *What is Called Thinking*, Heidegger (1971, p. 29-30) wrote: "Devastation is more than destruction. Devastation is more unearthly than destruction. Destruction only sweeps aside all that has grown up or been built so far; but devastation blocks all future growth and prevents all building [...] The African Sahara is only one kind of wasteland. The devastation of the earth can easily go hand in hand with a guaranteed supreme standard of living for men [...]. Devastation can ... can haunt us everywhere in the most unearthly way – by keeping itself hidden".

Returning to Osman, there may be yet another variation on the theme of the name in Turkish history, or rather in the history of the Ottoman period which began in 1299 and ended in 1923 with the proclamation of a republic and the abolition of the sultanate and caliphate. Osman Gazi (Osman I) was the founder and first sultan of the Ottoman Empire. He established the Osmanli dynasty, the Ottomans (with Osmanli in Turkish meaning "descendants of Osman"). He was succeeded by his son Orhan Gazi (Orhan I), who had the same name as Pamuk. "My mother would tell me she'd named me Orhan because, of all the Ottoman sultans, it was Sultan Orhan she had loved the most" (Pamuk, 2003 p. 358).

Then in the history of Ottoman art, one of the most famous of the early Ottoman painters was a certain Osman Hamdi Bey, who in the nineteenth century established an academy of art which taught the techniques and subjects of Western painting. Turkish painters began to be sent to

France and Italy, while European artists were invited to Turkey by the Sultan. The museum in Istanbul still contains a painting by Osman Hamdi.

Hence Osman, as a name, enjoys a certain prestige, which has left its mark historically on both politics and art. Those who aim to rise high may be motivated by a desire for success and power, but also by the need to eliminate lingering doubts about the inadequacy or the mediocrity of their achievements and lives. In *Istanbul* Pamuk writes: "The city into which I was born was poorer, shabbier, and more isolated than it had ever been in its two-thousand-year history. For me it has always been a city of ruins and of end-of-empire melancholy. I've spent my life either battling with this melancholy or making it my own" (Pamuk, 2003, p. 6). And later: "But for the city's more sensitive and attuned residents, these ruins are reminders that the present city is so poor and confused that it can never again dream of rising to its former heights of wealth, power and culture" (p. 101).

Osman, the protagonist of *The New Life*, seeks to overcome his sense of inadequacy and poverty by relying on a book. He extols what he finds written in it, because he believes it will enable him to achieve harmony and completeness, showing him the way to rise from mediocrity and cast off his ennui and depression. For most of his youth, "I had desired to set myself apart from others, someone special who had a goal that was entirely different from other people's" (p. 289). In the end he changes his mind, with realism and suffering, accepting the moments of rage and sorrow following his renunciation of his project, as illusory as it was ambitious and exciting. At the end of the novel, as suggested by Antonio Stanca, he decides to "abandon his quest and return to the condition of all, an existence spent amid banality."

"I liked watching soccer games on TV, lazing around home on Sundays, getting soused some evenings, going to the station with my daughter to watch the trains, reading, gossiping with my wife and making love, puffing on cigarettes and drinking coffee someplace or other" (Pamuk, 1995, p. 292), says Osman in the last pages of his story, at 35 years old.

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