

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.

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In a novel names are never neutral. They always signify, if it is only ordinariness. 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

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.