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## DAVID FOSTER WALLACE SPECIAL ISSUE

# "I Kept Saying Her Name": Naming, Labels and Power in the Early Writing of David Foster Wallace

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Among the most immediately striking features of David Foster Wallace's writing is his use of names. Ranging from broad comedy to philosophical and cryptic signposting, the ways Wallace names his characters, and, just as significantly, the ways his characters name themselves and each other, are central to the development of identity, and to the appropriation and exercise of power. The forms and relationships of nomination in Wallace's fiction speak to a range of his primary artistic concerns, and a reading of these interactions sheds light on both the intricate narrative structures and the grounding ideologies of his writing. This essay traces some of the patterns in these nominative practices, arguing that an onomastic reading of Wallace's work traces the sometimes less than clear connection between the broad comic style that marks his early work in particular and the profound philosophical engagement undertaken throughout his career.

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Generally speaking things once they are named the name does not go on doing anything to them – Gertrude Stein.

## I – Introduction

Among the most immediately striking features of David Foster Wallace's writing is his use of names. Ranging from broad comedy to philosophical and cryptic signposting, the ways Wallace names his characters, and, just as significantly, the ways his characters name themselves and each other, are central to the development of identity, and to the appropriation and exercise of power. The forms and relationships of nomination in Wallace's fiction speak to a range of his primary artistic concerns, and a reading of these interactions sheds light on both the intricate narrative structures and the grounding ideologies of his writing. In the following pages, I trace some of the patterns in these nominative practices, arguing that an onomastic reading of Wallace's work illuminates the sometimes less than clear connection between the broad comic style that marks his early texts in particular and the profound philosophical engagement undertaken throughout his career. By exploring the diverse operations of naming, signature, anonymity and onomastic relations, this essay positions naming as one of the primary unifying factors of the structural, formal and philosophical elements of Wallace's writing. The essay focuses on Wallace's early texts, especially *The Broom of the System* (1987), because it is here that the onomastic codes by which Wallace's work operates are at their most obvious. As with many of the other themes and strategies he employed, Wallace would develop and refine his naming practices over the course of his career. For this reason, while reference is made to the recurrence of patterns throughout the body of his work, examining the nominative features of *The Broom of the System* offers a lens through which to focus on a career-long preoccupation with how we can meaningfully talk to and about each other.

While there is a range of possible lenses through which to undertake this reading, the clearest seems to me to be a combination of type and function. That is to say, I am interested in the ways in which the functions of names can be categorised in his early writing, and the types of names they are, a dual taxonomy that again

foregrounds the connection between form and content. Broadly speaking, this study makes use of the typological categories of comedy and heritage, and the functional categories of power, signposting and identity-formation. The typological categories can be further broken down, with comedy constituting both simply playful names (e.g. Frequent and Vigorous) and relationally significant names (e.g. Lenores Jr and Sr), and heritage referring to both metatextual (literary or philosophical) and intratextual (familial) heritage. As ever with Wallace, liminality is rife, and some names straddle both typologies, but the categorisation remains useful in highlighting the plural operations of naming strategies. This combination of categories works both to identify the primary nominative strategies that characterise Wallace's work and to frame a critical reading of the importance of these strategies to his craft. By exploring the types of names visible in his first novel and the onomastic and intertextual networks that make up the text, it is possible to trace the pattern of structural and formal connection that Wallace would develop and refine over the course of his career. An examination of these networks accounts for the persistent and sometimes jarring juxtapositions of broad comedy, expansive intertextuality and searching considerations of the self-world dyad. More particularly, the dual taxonomy undertaken here highlights the interdependence of form and content in Wallace's writing, even and especially when that connection appears loosest. I argue, indeed, that it is at the moments of the broadest and most juvenile nominative "gaggery" that Wallace is most deeply engaged with the profound questions of solipsism and connection that most occupied him as an author and philosopher.

## **II – "Nomination as enfranchisement": the significance of the signifier**

Names and naming are of course a central consideration of any author, and of any critic, particularly considering the legacies of postmodernism, with its often-playful mistrust of signifiers. The power of names is the foundation of numerous myths and a stalwart trope of fantasy writing, to say nothing of a consistent puzzle to philosophers of the world since before Descartes cogitated upon the I. The name by which one is known is not intrinsic to oneself, but rather operates as a signpost to one's

physical or metaphysical reality. Even so, though the name is externally bestowed, it is somehow fundamental to the sense of one's identity. It is, therefore, in its way, perfectly representative of the bridge – or chasm – between inner and outer worlds. The naming of fictional characters is yet more fraught, operating as it does within a network of non-contingent events, where the generating consciousness has more control over the actions of the character than any parent, notwithstanding the author's post-publication obsolescence. Naming is a thing practiced upon a character, a semi-determining external operation that can never quite be fulfilled. Fictional names are always worthy of study for this reason; a character's name is not always a symbolic key to their function, but neither is it ever coincidental. Terry Caesar has suggested that standard authorial practice for choosing a name is heavily symbolic, that "names are meant to disclose some essential facet of a character which it is the burden of the narrative to enact and clarify" (Caesar 5), but this seems a simplistic explication of a complex process. Rather let us say that such disclosure is indeed a common feature of narrative construction, but it can hardly be said to be the necessary condition of character naming, nor so blunt an instrument as it sounds. Indeed, Caesar takes aim in the same article at critics who typically "pick off a symbolic possibility from a character's name and work it into the interpretive scheme of whatever it is that the critic happens to be discussing" (5), rather begging the question of how there might be more than one symbolic possibility, if the name exists to disclose this essential facet. Caesar is quite right that readers and critics seek semantic significance in fictional names, sometimes to the exclusion (as he points out in Pynchon's case) of the more superficial creative zing of names that are simply comic, or pleasing, or clever. He argues that "[t]he deliberateness of [Pynchon's] naming is seldom conceded its joking, ironic, tearaway dimension", and that the characters "are often discontinuous with their names" (6). For Pynchon, according to this reading, naming is a way of thumbing the authorial nose at critical praxis.

Christine Brooke-Rose writes that "all naming is itself a story" (Brooke-Rose 288). She argues that onomastic criticism belongs to narratology, and is anathema to poststructuralism, but notes that John Barth, for one, "has always been fascinated by formalism and by systems of every kind" (289). An onomastic reading of

Barth, narratological or not, necessarily highlights the systemic nature of naming, and his characters – “themselves manic systematisers” (289) – consistently realise the *instability* of names and nominative systems. There is a dark whimsy at work here: the allusive quality of many of Barth’s names, from the cod-mythological to the Dickensian is at once ludic and inviting to the reader (who, recognising a possible origin, congratulates himself, aligning himself with the author) and (intentionally) provocative and destabilising to both reader and character, predicated as it is on the broaching of borders. An allusive name ruptures the boundary of the text in which it exists by inviting the reader to recall the text alluded to, forcing an intertextual characterisation that both enriches and destabilises the narrative and characterisation, colouring events and actions by association. Like Barth, and indeed directly invoking his writing in “Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way”, Wallace engages in nominative trickery that both amuses and challenges, often simultaneously.

Like many of the writers to whom he is compared, indeed, Wallace’s practices of naming and description emerge as a central aspect of his writing, both as a stylistic flourish and as a narrative device. Like Barth, he invokes and inverts mythological identities, deploying names to torpedo illusory stability and nominative determinism. Like Pynchon, he forestalls and undermines critical semantophilia and indulges in broad slapstick nominative jest. Like Joyce and Dickens, he freights major and minor characters with fizzingly onomatopoeic names, Incandenza, Bombardini and Sylvanshine trooping behind Heep, Bloom, Dedalus, Havisham. The often-zany character descriptors (and it is worth recalling that Wallace often uses memorable nicknames and epithets as names) are one of the most striking features of his narratives, playful, inventive and often absurd.

From the whimsical to the deferent to the puzzling, it is in the practices of naming and nicknaming, in fact, that the points of contact between Wallace’s literary project and his philosophical questions are strongest; in *Broom* the central concerns of Wallace’s work are on display, and they would become subtler, although no less important, over the course of his career. The complexities of nomenclature throughout the writing are clearly and directly connected with Wallace’s philosophical entanglements, specifically with Ludwig Wittgenstein and Paul Ricoeur.

Wittgenstein's central importance to Wallace's writing was one of the first critical threads in Wallace studies, and is so well canvassed as to be by this point exhausted. Wittgenstein's influence was comprehensively discussed by early critics like Lance Olsen and Marshall Boswell, and has been picked up by numerous commentators in more recent years including myself, Adam Kelly, James Ryerson, Bradley Fest, Andrew Warren and many others. Interestingly, though, given his preoccupation with names and their relation to identity, there has been little direct critical engagement with the ways in which Wittgenstein is relevant to Wallace's somewhat histrionic use of names. Boswell addresses the question in *Understanding David Foster Wallace* (2009) as an aspect of the philosophical explorations Wallace was undertaking in *Broom*, but the central semantic and aesthetic role of naming conventions remains largely unexamined. The complex layering of meaning in Wallace's use of names is often overlooked in favour of their broad comic function. As Olsen points out, though, one of the things that unite Wittgenstein and Wallace is their propensity to engage in play with a purpose: "they play games in order to wrestle with very real problems, in order to attempt to work through the world" (Olsen 202). In this sense, names are a vital element of Wallace's world-building, another form of his tendency to literalise complex problems, and they work to unite the philosophical, artistic and comic facets of his writing. I will, therefore, in exploring this serious play, re-tread some of the same ground as Olsen and Boswell in particular, expanding it to focus directly on Wittgenstein's relevance to naming in Wallace. Of particular importance to this goal is the concept of meaning-as-use, particularly central to *Broom*, and less obviously but just as powerfully present in later naming practices.

### III – What a funny name! Comic onomastics

As I have suggested, arguably the most obvious category of naming in the fiction – particularly, though by no means exclusively, the early fiction – is the comic one. The predatory singsong of the man-eating Candy Mandible and the overt silliness of Judith Prieth, as well as the almost-too-blatant Rick Vigorous and his silent partner Frequent, all introduced early in *The Broom of the System*, are the first in a litany of names so broadly comic as to almost obscure other function. Later, the sheer sound-

pleasure of Merrill Errol Lehl in *The Pale King* (2011) and the incandescent puns of the Incandenza family in *Infinite Jest* (1996) seem to focus on the amusement value of names. Norman Bombardini, the bit player in *Broom* whose name unavoidably foregrounds his aggressive expansionism, epitomises this tendency toward slapstick nomenclature, whose intrusion into the text works (awkwardly) to draw attention to the absurdity of names. However, it is in this very absurdity that we can see the critical importance of naming. As Boswell argues, *Broom* is partly a notebook of juvenile jokes, but it is also "a serious inquiry into language and its relationship to the observable world" (Boswell 21), and Wallace's engagement with this quandary, which would persist throughout his career, begins with names. Indeed, in this vein Wallace himself offers an assessment of the serious function of comedy in his essay on Kafka, where he notes that the wit at work is "inaccessible to children whom our culture has trained to see jokes as entertainment and entertainment as reassurance" (64). Lucas Thompson has pointed out that Wallace's engagement with Kafka neatly encapsulates his own propensity for "comic literalization" (Thompson 142), a motif that is strongly borne out in the defamiliarising names and onomastic relationships that characterise *Broom*, in which relationships of power and seniority are often literally echoed in the naming network. Comedy, often tipping into the absurd or ungainly, is both an obvious source of pleasure for writer and reader and a way of drawing attention to, and destabilising our relationship with, the arbitrariness and mutability of language, specifically nominative language. The humour associated with naming in Wallace, then, overlaps with the other categories identified earlier, as well as being a category in its own right, and is integral to the serious functions of nomenclature with which the rest of this paper is concerned.

Related to and often signalled or highlighted by the comic function of names is a consistent engagement with literary and critical history. Wallace's complex engagement with his artistic inheritances, particularly but not only the postmodernist heritage that infused his writing, offers one rich source for his use of naming, especially in the early work. I have already noted that the laugh/groan moment of Judith Prieth in *The Broom of the System* is one of the standout incidents of slightly obnoxious nominative gaggery, and *Broom*, of all Wallace's writing, is most given over to that



slapstick Pynchonian nomenclature. Obvious humour aside, Wallace's naming conventions are tellingly associated with a rich and comic literary history. Indeed, many of the characters' names are more complexly comical than the straightforward gag, taking their cues from Joyce, Beckett and Dickens, among others. There are other slightly more obscure patterns at work: for instance, there is an interesting recurrence of names associated with light – Lenore means bright light – *Jest's* Hal O, and Orin, which can mean either light or pale, along with the surname Incandenza, of course, and Claude Sylvanshine in *The Pale King*, whose surname refers to a dappling of sunlight through leaves in autumn. This motif does not appear to have particular significance beyond this recurrence, arguably existing only for the pleasure of patterning, a feature that persists throughout Wallace's work in the form of lists – drugs, plants, places, and here also names. While these figures trace a pure thread of linguistic pleasure through Wallace's writing, naming tends to be a more meaningful device; by contrast with simple patterning, comedy is typically not a singular function with regard to naming in Wallace's writing, but one of a complex web of signifying elements including homage, resistance, relationship and power.

Besides the largely playful engagement with older literary *milieux*, the Dickensian bounce of Bombardini and LaVache, the Joycean code-switching of Incandenza and Sipe and so forth, it is also abundantly clear that in his writing and his naming, Wallace was reacting against his immediate postmodernist heritage – what Wallace termed “the patriarch for my patricide” (McCaffery, 146) – most clearly in the early days. Brian McHale argues – rather unfairly – that *The Broom of the System* “seems abjectly imitative of *The Crying of Lot 49*, hardly more than a rewrite of it” (McHale 194); although he goes on to acknowledge that this may have been unconscious. Bizarre unconscious inscriptions aside, though, McHale notes that later, in *Jest*, Wallace would use the surname of one of Pynchon's recurring characters – Bodine – as part of a pseudonym of Orin's. Similarly, of course, in “Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way”, Professor Ambrose's name is taken from Barth's “Lost in the Funhouse”, which is both explicitly invoked at the start of the story, and strongly present throughout. The movement of Ambrose's name to a surname, and Wallace's

appropriation of that Pynchonian surname, bear particular relevance to the cultural practice of both patrilineal and patronymic surnames. Orin's appropriation of Bodine is a "private joke" that playfully indicates the self-conscious debt to Pynchon, and is an adopted patrilineal surname: in other words, Orin's choice of it indicates Wallace's acknowledgement by 1996 that he has adopted Pynchonian practices in his work, though he disputed it in relation to *Broom*. Importantly, this usage also indicates that his engagement with Pynchon is temporary, because Bodine is a pseudonym, not a given name. The idea of father-son creative heritage is even more clearly, and perhaps more seriously, invoked in "Westward," where the appropriation of the name, its conversion to a patronymic surname *and* the paternal position of the so-named Professor Ambrose all serve to create a strong and unchanging filial honorific. Taken alongside Wallace's own engagement with the idea of patricide, it seems clear that the appropriation and redeployment of these surnames signifies Wallace's awareness of his own complex filial relationship with the preceding generation, and incorporates that relationship as an integral structural strategy, simultaneously acknowledging, celebrating and resisting that inheritance. In "Westward", too, there is a further layering of the problematic patronymic, when we add the figure of Mark to the mix. Mark's surname is Nechtr, which fairly unavoidably sounds like nectar, which is of course mythologically linked to Ambrose (or rather Ambrosia), placing Mark and Professor Ambrose in at least a nominative relationship, the narrative possibility of which is further hinted at in the text. In a metatextual reading of that relationship, this is further complicated by Mark's pseudonymous use of the name Dave in his own writing which, coupled with the setting of the narrative, naturally invites a reading of Mark as another thinly-veiled avatar for Wallace himself (following the black-Converse-clad heels of Lenore, of whom more anon), which reading then places Wallace in a definite but uneasy relationship of shadowy potential affiliation with his forbears (in some ways a literal affiliation, given the implication in "Westward" that Mark is Ambrose's son).

While close attention to the various categories of names help to position Wallace as a writer in dialogue with immediate and longer-range literary history, the

operations of both comic and allusive naming also serve to elucidate Wallace's rather more complex engagement with philosophy. Lenore Beadsman is also positioned in the centre of a gag as the nominative double of her great grandmother, and their nominative relationship is foregrounded. This nominative doubling is the most obvious connection of naming and coherent identity, but it is not the only occurrence of Lenore's family members' complex relationships with their names; we might think for example of the complexity of "everybody in the family with male genitals is Stoney" (*Broom* 250) and that name's association with commerce, a tension that arises throughout the narrative, or how LaVache works consistently to reject his own name in a range of ways, while John seems to embody the history of his first name.

Wallace highlights Lenore's shared name with a joke, when Lenore arrives at the Shaker Heights Nursing Home reception after her great-grandmother disappears. She tells the receptionist, whom she does not know, that she is Lenore Beadsman. The receptionist, who is aware that her great-grandmother is missing, which at this time Young Lenore does not know, takes offence at what she perceives to be Lenore's poorly chosen jest, and there is a moment of dark humour. More importantly, though, this doubling problematises the Wittgensteinian theory of ostensive or Adamic meaning, which is the idea that the basic components of language are names, which we combine to form propositions about the world. The question is complicated by the meaning-as-use paradigm: if we use a name to refer to one thing, the name becomes the name of the thing for which we use it. However, if the thing itself changes its function, does its name remain the same? This is a theory Wittgenstein revisited in his later work, particularly the *Philosophical Investigations* (1953), showing that a name is necessarily independent of a thing, given that it still refers to the thing even if the thing is absent. A person's name, for example, is still their name after death: as Wittgenstein argues, "[w]hen Mr. N.N. dies, one says that the bearer of the name dies, not that the meaning dies. And it would be nonsensical to say this, for if the name ceased to have meaning, it would make no sense to say 'Mr. N.N. is dead'" (Wittgenstein, *PI* §40). Of course, in the context of families, as in *Broom*, this argument is complicated by the concept of the patrilineal name and

surname: in certain circumstances one does indeed say that the meaning of a name has died.

Wallace engages with naming, identity and self-definition in a number of instances in *Broom*, from nicknames and pseudonyms to nominative doubling and therapeutic stage names. The signalling function of names, most commonly comic and/or allusive, is one of the novel's most frequent strategies for philosophical meditation on language. The use of therapeutic stage names (the distancing of the self by a pseudonym) is embodied by Lenore's sister and her husband and children in a group therapy session. In this case, the family puts on a play arising out of the session. Each family member has a mask of his or her own face, and two other masks of nondescript faces. During the drama, the family name, Spaniard, is altered slightly to Snapiard. The "actors" are in nondescript white masks. Each member of the (actual) family has a number of lines to speak. This literalised exercise in performative identity looks forward to the performativity integral to the AA system illustrated in *Infinite Jest*. The drama wanders through each family member's searches for individuality and wholeness as something other than family members. The thrust of the drama is that the "family members" – the characters of Alvin, Clarice, Spatula and Stoney as masked *dramatis personae* – discover that "what they needed to get their feelings of being themselves from was *themselves*" (*Broom* 172, italics original). At the end of the performance, "Alvin, Clarice, Stoney, and Spatula took off their Alvin-, Clarice-, Stoney-, and Spatula-masks, and stared deeply into the empty eyeholes of their own faces" (*Broom* 173). The family removes their masks and move from characters to people, restored from their pseudo-selves as Snapiards to their actual selves as Spaniards by the performance of self-definition. The play thus explicitly enacts the theory that coherent identity depends upon an ultimately illusory (or ephemeral, at least) set of attributes and behaviours we adopt, some internal and some external. Wittgenstein engages in a long consideration of the connection between the subject "I" and the name(s) by which that subject is called by others. While he does not arrive at any conclusion, he proposes and dismisses the idea that "I" refers to a body, but also rejects the proposition that "I" has *no* meaning. In discussing pain, which he uses as

a shorthand for subjective experience and expression/communication, Wittgenstein highlights the distinction between description – reporting someone else’s pain behaviours – and exhibition – recognising the sensation of pain and engaging in pain behaviours of one’s own (Wittgenstein, *PI* §269–317). This distinction is echoed in the Spaniard family drama by their recognition that the source of coherent selfhood is recognition of sensation rather than conformity to description. The connection between my name and my self depends upon an authentic exhibition of my sensations. In *Broom’s* therapy play, the Spaniards seek authentic connection with and expression of their interior sensations as the source for their “feeling of being themselves” (*Broom* 172). Hans Sluga writes persuasively of this anti-objectivist bent in Wittgenstein’s writing, arguing that “the belief in a real self results from confusing this self-conception with an objectively real thing” (Sluga 350). The Spaniards begin with precisely this confusion, and end with a reliance upon expressed subjective experience, just as Wittgenstein concludes we must.

#### **IV – We are family: onomastic ties**

Family and familial relationships are crucial to the understanding of nominative practices in Wallace’s writing, which we see later with the Incandenzas, and which is especially obvious in *Broom*. Immediately prior to the scene of the performance, Alvin Spaniard is watching a television program about the Russian child-gymnast, Kopek Spasova, who is visiting Ohio with her father and manager, Ruble Spasov. The family name is of little literary interest, but the first names are notable for their relation to each other: the Russian version of dollar to cent. This playful relation of names may be no more than a flourish on Wallace’s part, but its proximity to the family therapy scene tempts a more intention-based reading. The familial relationship of father and daughter is defamiliarised, and thus highlighted, by the concurrent relationship in a different context of their first names. This semantic relation of family members, particularly in view of its juxtaposition with a scene heavily focused on family and identity, recalls another of Wittgenstein’s central theories, that of “family resemblances”. With this in mind, it is also interesting to note that the whole novel

turns on Lenore's struggle to disentangle herself from her family, which is ultimately unsuccessful. Every event, every character, every part of the book ultimately relates to the powerful hold her family has on the city of Corinth. The upshot of the story is that while Lenore can assume a solid and inalienable identity and assume her name with certainty, she remains a function of her circumstances and the network of language games within which she exists and operates. Lenore's identity is firmly attached to the position of her family. In this sense, Lenore's meaning is her connection to her family, both in the nominative connections of her first and surnames, and in the connection of her identity to her family's power and influence.

Returning for a moment to Wittgenstein's theory of meaning-as-use, this idea can be extended to imply that one's name (familial or otherwise) is one's meaning. Nomination, as it is discussed in Wittgenstein's early work, the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (1921), entails enfranchisement: what we call a thing reflects what we use it for (indeed, a broom is the central example in his work). A useless thing, by extension, has no need of a name, a position that would prove complicated in his later considerations of language. Wallace would comment on this in his review of *Wittgenstein's Mistress*, referring to the protagonist's "prolonged musings on the ontological status of named things" (BFN 112), in particular the status of those names in the absence of the thing itself. The obvious application of such a nomination-as-enfranchisement/validation theory in *Broom* is to Lenore Sr.'s life of inactivity in the nursing home, highlighted by Lenore's father (*Broom* 150). It is significant that Lenore Sr. never reappears in the novel. Having been relegated to the position of signifier, with two names (Lenore and Gramma) and no function, she must become abstract. In fact, the central problem of the narrative – Lenore Sr.'s disappearance – can in fact be read as an act of generous self-sacrifice. Wittgenstein argues that a name must cleave to something (Wittgenstein, *Tractatus* §3.203). The name Lenore no longer cleaves to her: her life is without purpose and therefore needs no name, so she is relegated to the abstract. Lenore Jr. is therefore left as functionally the only Lenore, and her achievement is to appropriate the name and mould it to her own identity, to as it were *become* Lenore, which is the real outcome of the novel. Lenore

Sr.'s disappearance, Boswell points out, gives Lenore Jr. the space to recognise that "the meaning of her name does not depend on the existence of some stable outside referent – here, the great-grandmother – but rather on its own volition within a system of relations" (Boswell 36). I suggest rather that Lenore's name becomes the external referent of an internally consistent set of features, identifying a self-contained agent in reference to her surroundings and relationships. This appropriation and understanding of her name is impossible until Lenore has stabilised that set of features to which the name Lenore comes to refer, as she does in her search for the physically and semantically absent "outside referent," Lenore Sr.

The significance of Lenore's shared name and the resulting instability in her identity is reinforced by the actual instability of the signifier. As I mentioned earlier, besides sharing a Christian name with her great-granddaughter, Lenore Sr. is referred to on more than one occasion as "Gramma" by Lenore. This is a none-too-subtle reference to Gramma Beadsman's obsession with linguistic structure, and more particularly, her use of language – grammar – to manipulate Lenore. More importantly, however, it also points up another problematic aspect of ostensive naming as mentioned above: if each object has a single, fully analysed name, how can people have nicknames? This problem, particularly the fact that a person can have at least as many nicknames as acquaintances, highlights the conclusion that Wittgenstein would approach in his later life: that names – and by extension the whole of language – are a function of their circumstances, contextual, contingent and fluid. This issue of naming is most prevalent in regard to Lenore's search for self-definition, but recurs in other areas of the plot throughout the novel. The association of naming with power and will would recur throughout Wallace's work, becoming particularly significant in the consideration of the power dynamics between characters and often mediated by gender, a concern prefigured in *Broom* by the comparison of Lenore's relationships with Rick and, later, Andrew "Wang-Dang" Lang.

The option of more than one name problematizes Adamic identity further. Fritz Senn notes of Joyce's onomastic practices that "names are drapery" (Senn 466), often changed and changing. The use of nicknames and pseudonyms in *Dubliners*, he

argues, destabilise the narrative authority and the certainty of identity, citing "let you be Murphy and I'll be Smith" from "An Encounter" (Senn 465–467), a charge that could very well be levelled at Wallace in his use of nicknames. Elsewhere, we might think of Melville's opening salvo "Call me Ishmael" as an example of a destabilising pseudonym. Similarly, in *Broom*, Wallace explores and extends the disruptive power of assumed names, both comical and serious. "Biff" Diggerence, who appears in the opening scene and is mentioned only once more, much later, is a character whose sole function seems to be his nickname. He perfectly illustrates Boswell's argument that *Broom* is "in many ways a compendium of gags", and Wallace himself commented in the McCaffery interview that he "love[d] gags" (McCaffery 142), which seems to be borne out in the otherwise arguably unnecessary inclusion of Diggerence's character. That said, nicknames in Wallace's writing often signify comfort and security: for example, Lenore's eldest brother, Stonecipher III, has distanced himself from his family and name by not one, but two name changes (LaVache, his middle name, and "Antichrist", his college moniker), with the expressed aim of establishing a new identity, although he continues to define himself in opposition to his family. "As the Antichrist", he explains to Lenore, "[. . .] it's gloriously clear where I leave off and others begin" (*Broom* 250), thus rejecting the tradition of "everyone with male genitals in the family [being] called Stonecipher". In the later novels, the frequent uses of epithets tend to signpost, often ironically, the primary functions of various characters: "Poor" Tony and yrstruly, whose narcissism define their addicted alienation; in *The Pale King* "Irrelevant" Chris Fogle and the spectral, unfixed "Pale King" himself, as well as the more general term "pencils" confine characters to heavily circumscribed roles relative to their surroundings. Names are a form of forcible contextualization, a fundamentally Wittgensteinian and in some ways utilitarian means of positioning people in relation to the world. At another level of this pattern, Q, the silent interviewer of *Brief Interviews With Hideous Men*, disappears so that she, like Gramma, is nothing but a name, and a pseudonym at that, linking the hideous men in question to each other and to a broader phenomenology of gendered power play. Like Gramma, Q is the absent centre of the narrative, a purely nominative presence whose



name arranges and orders others, while also occluding and circumscribing her own identity.

### **V – Signal, signature, ownership**

While names are used by the characters to identify themselves and take charge of their own identities, they are also used to signify possession and relationship. *Broom's* very first scene is one in which autograph-hunting plays a memorable role. Lenore, her sister Clarice, whom she is visiting at Mount Holyoke College, and Clarice's roommates, are the recipients of an unannounced visit from two Amherst undergraduates, Andrew "Wang-Dang" Lang and Bernard Werner "Biff" Diggerence. They are pledges to the entertainingly-monikered Psi Phi fraternity and have been given the task of securing "the signatures of no fewer than *fahv* [five] of Mount Holyoke's loveliest before sunrise" (*Broom* 17). The scene is comic, if slightly uncomfortable – the boys are demanding signatures on their wealthy posteriors – but it is worth noting the immediate focus on names and labelling. This is a good example of the tendency mentioned earlier to disguise the message of an episode in an entertaining cover story. It would, however, be inaccurate to say that the cover story is a mere stylistic flourish, with no function other than paralipsis; rather, it is a case of layering the meaning, of the authorial misdirection that would become one of Wallace's signature manoeuvres. It is also significant for the inscription element of the episode: the privileging of speech over writing or *vice versa* was of course integral to the post-structuralist movement and to deconstruction, which challenged the logocentrism of the modernist era. As such, the signatures at the centre of this scene subtly align Lenore with the method of deconstruction, with its implications of plurality and instability, in keeping with both her unstable identity and the implications of being a character in a story who, being written, cannot speak.

Besides their connection with the critical and ideological shifts of late twentieth-century literature, signatures and initials play a crucial role in establishing possession and position, from the early scene in which Andrew and Biff insist that the girls sign them, to the very end, where Rick Vigorous is known simply as R.V. It is perhaps

significant, as Boswell points out, that the first signatory of the Amherst boys in the novel's opening scene, Mindy, eventually becomes Lang's (ultimately estranged) wife. However, this seems an incomplete tracing of the pattern: Mindy is possessed by Lang, and eventually discarded by him, at which point she takes up with Rick, an obsessively word-oriented publisher and failed writer with palpable possession anxiety over Lenore, the "telos" of his life whom he ultimately loses and who ends up attaching herself to Lang. Mindy, inscribed and so claimed by Lang, matches up with Rick, who is anxious to possess, to claim. In balance with this, Lenore, who dramatically, even violently, refuses to be signed in the first scene, and resists Rick's attempts to claim her throughout their relationship, is drawn to Lang, who does not possess her, but more importantly has no desire to do so. This point is reinforced in Rick's peculiar dream of the four of them, in which Lang signs his initials on a drawing of Lenore, bringing the two-dimensional Lenore to life. She then signs him, in an echo of the first scene. The voluntary nature of both signings constitutes the creation of a shared system within which they understand each other, as Dr. Jay explains to Rick in the "rap session" dealing with the dream (*Broom* 344). The pattern of inscriptions here might also be read as an oblique reference to Walter Benjamin's theories of inscription, specifically the image of "the literalization of the conditions of life" (Benjamin 527), in the sense that Lang's drawing of Lenore, once signed, becomes precisely a literalization of her when it comes to life. Benjamin's definition of inscription highlights both the necessity of composition in art and the composedness of art: Lang's inscription of his initials on his drawing of Lenore in Rick's dream draws attention to both its status as an artificial image and his status as the creator of the image. Further, his signature makes visible the act of writing, and immediately brings the picture to life, in the dream. It is difficult to avoid reading this scene as a literalisation of the materiality of inscription, particularly in light of the writing/speech dichotomy of privilege so central to deconstruction. Paul de Man illustrates the concept of the materiality of inscription by reference to Victor Hugo's poem "Ecrit sur la vitre d'une fenetre flamande", or "written on a Flemish window pane" (DeMan 51). This title makes explicit the act of writing; the titular reference to framing and the

actual framing of the poem by the title make the physicality – or materiality – of the poem its central image. The poem resonates strongly with the writing/picture image of Rick's dream, inviting a consideration of writing, and particularly the idea of signature, as material acts, and how they are distinct from acts of speech.

*Broom's* signing dream is significant not just for the act of inscription – acts of writing or other forms of creative output are common in Wallace's work – but also for the nature of the inscription, which is nominative, possessive and specifically masculine. As we have already seen, Wallace understood names as having a kind of power to confer meaning, a power with which he engaged as a critic in "The Empty Plenum" (1990). In a footnote to this essay, which frequently alludes to *The Broom of the System*, Wallace observes that "themes of nomination-as-enfranchisement, presence-as-privilege, also run through much of the feminist theory with which this novel's author [David Markson] reveals himself familiar" (BFN 112, note. 45), which seems to confirm Wallace's own subscription to, or at least awareness of, those themes. Having said that, Wallace's fictional engagement with the issue of nomination-as-enfranchisement was by no means as simple as his remarks here imply. The scene with the Amherst boys, for example, exposes a problematic aspect of Wallace's concept of nomination-as-enfranchisement as it relates to Lenore's appropriation of her own name, which is best expressed by Wallace himself, in the essay on *Wittgenstein's Mistress*. He notes that the novel's protagonist, Kate, feels "a twinge of envy whenever she countenances the possibility of things existing without being named or subjected to predication" (113). This envy highlights contradictory impulses in both Markson's Kate and Wallace's own Lenore, to both take possession of their own names and also repudiate the Adamic imposition of these names. In this sense, while Wallace's engagement with names is by no means a gender-specific practice, some of his ambivalence over the power dynamics of naming seems to come through most strongly in the context of gender considerations such as this one. In *Broom*, for example, Lenore seeks at once to take possession of her own name, as has already been discussed, in order to establish her autonomy, and to reject the Adamic nomination, which functions not as enfranchisement, but as an act of subjugation practiced by Rick.

Thus, by voluntarily applying her name (an Evian action), Lenore rejects Rick's (Adamic) claim on her, which is implicit in his repeated use of her name. By doing so, Lenore claims her own name, bestowing its power according to her own volition, on Andy, thus paradoxically neutralising the act of naming.

In considering the operation of these iterative networks, the writing of Paul Ricoeur on the idea of narrative identity is illuminating. In "Narrative Identity" (1991), Ricoeur distinguishes between the *ipse* and the *idem*, which is to say the unassailably individual aspect of the self, which he calls *ipse*, and the identificatory aspect of the self, which he terms *idem*, or the selfish and the sharing. Lenore's voluntary use of her own name displays a balance between these two elements of identity, while Rick's desperation to consume Lenore highlights a strong bias towards the *idem* and a weakened *ipse*, or sense of his own self. The novel might properly be described as Lenore's struggle to balance her narrative identity and claim her name (Hayes-Brady, *Unspeakable Failures* 120–121). Indeed, among all of Wallace's female characters, Lenore is most concerned with the question of her name; while a number of other characters in the novel explore issues of naming, Lenore is the only character whose name is, effectively and problematically, not her own. Questions of nomination and self-ownership are problematized throughout the novel, by the efforts of others to prescribe Lenore's story, and to appropriate her name. By contrast, the movement away from the single nominative manifested in the frequent use of nicknames both by and for characters offers an interesting inversion of Wittgensteinian theories about naming, evoking in its reversal much of the work of Gottlob Frege on Millian naming. Fregean descriptivism suggests that "the content of a name is not the object it refers to [as Millianism would suggest] but rather a mode of presentation of that object, where a mode of presentation is something that picks out that object" (Caplan 182). In fact, Wallace mentions Frege, "a Wittgenstein-era titan", by name in a footnote to "The Empty Plenum", in the context of naming and ownership, and the appropriative distinction between mentioning and using a name (*BFN* 80, note 7). The philosophical connotations of naming and the use of designation as a tool of power were clearly present in Wallace's mind from his early writings.

The name, then, depends on context and usage. By extension, if the object (or subject) to which a name refers is sufficiently stable, the referring nominative can change without affecting the named object. It is significant that Lenore's eldest brother, Stonecipher III, has distanced himself from his family and name by not one, but two name changes (LaVache, his middle name, and "Antichrist", his college moniker), with the expressed aim of establishing a new identity. Tracey notes that LaVache translates as "The Cow", possibly echoing Wittgenstein's description of language's relationship to philosophy as "the money we use to buy the cow" (Tracey 165). This dynamic of naming, nicknames and power is particularly problematized in Wallace's treatment of gender, when at times his female characters have nicknames imposed on them, taking from them the control or articulation of their own identities: both Q and the Granola-Cruncher in "Brief Interview #20" are cases in point. Nominative anxiety is compounded for female characters by the imposition of names by a patriarchal system (think of the restrictive depiction of family in *Broom*, and LaVache's resistance to his father's name). It is worth noting too that the power dynamics that circle around naming and delineation are often played out through heavily gendered interactions, as I note elsewhere, with the silenced, anonymous or nicknamed female embodying issues of subjection and self-identification, as well as reinscribing forms of masculine power and agency (Hayes-Brady, "Personally I'm neutral" 68).

## VI – Nicknames, anonymity and networks

The power of naming and nicknaming remains clearly visible in Wallace's later writing. The male narrator of "Brief Interview #20" seeks to take ownership of the female protagonist by repeating her name, recalling that he "kept saying her name" (*Brief Interviews With Hideous Men* 270), a struggle echoed in "Oblivion", in which the narrator subsumes his wife's narrative identity wholly into his own voice. Joelle Van Dyne, by contrast, in *Infinite Jest*, mirrors LaVache in *Broom*, having a variety of nominative referents that include names, epithets, and *noms de guerre*. Interestingly, the use of nicknames or multiple nominative forms by a character in reference to themselves tends to suggest a stable underlying identity that is able to sustain

several referents simultaneously. By contrast, the search for a single name enacts precisely the kind of teleological pursuit that Wallace works against throughout his writing, seeking the closure and sterile positivity of pure self-referentiality. Further, the imposition of nicknames and epithets upon other characters by the primary narrative consciousness on the subordinate narrative players extends the (often but not always gendered) nominative anxiety into a form of disenfranchisement. Such anxiety contrasts sharply with the comfortable self-nomination of the many characters who make use of their own nicknames. In this respect, we might think of Sick Puppy in "Girl With Curious Hair", and especially John "No Relation" Wayne, whose defiant nickname invokes its own dismissal, repudiating the strongly physical masculinity associated with his namesake, indicating a confidence in his masculinity that is its own referent. In these and similar cases, the ability to claim one's own name signifies confident self-delineation, and a comfortable relationship with the symbolically mediated world.

By contrast, anonymity in Wallace's work tends to symbolize alienation and dispossession. Interestingly, this is less visible in *Broom*, where the division of names is a problem rather than their absence; even here there are passages of unattributed dialogue that destabilise the plot. The problem of anonymity is particularly notable, though, in the AA sections of *Infinite Jest*. The novel is dotted with sections of anonymized dialogue, which alienates the reader, mirroring the disconnection of the addicted characters. In the AA meetings that thread through the narrative, a metalinguistic network is formed by way of both the self-naming and the anonymity that is so central to the AA project. The "sharing" in AA encodes the sharer's identity within a specific set of symbols. The obligatory phrase uttered by each contributor at the opening of their narrative – "My name is X and I am an alcoholic" (see Arminen for an assessment of the linguistic structures of AA meetings) – fixes the speaker's identity as part of a group, in the kind of community structure Andrew Warren identifies (Warren 309–408). Particularly in the context of a narrative of addiction, the AA system works in concert with Wallace's broader project of identity. The identifying phrase works in two parts, firstly to separate the speaker as an individual – "my name

is X" – and secondly to define them as part of a network – "I am an alcoholic". The conjunction, and, links the two contradictory speech acts and positions its adherents in a metacommunicative system without the need for identification; the name is the badge of entry, a mark of collective, rather than individual, identity. Alcoholics Anonymous offers an iteration of direct narrative interaction on a micro level, but the participants are members of a larger system, too, the unconscious community of communal experience. While it is more obvious as outlined above in respect of family names and relationships, the use of names in general often functions to place us in relation to one another, socially, linguistically, culturally and sometimes racially. We listen to names for echoes of familiarity or likeness, and the name itself, independently of any other signifier, is often enough to place someone in a category.

For Wallace, the same metalinguistic networks are often overtly symbolized by the relationship of names, with relational onomastics working to foreground the social embeddedness of particular characters, again highlighting both individual and collective forms of identity. The familial onomastics of Ruble and Kopek Spasov(a), Lenore's nominative doubling and the shared masculine name of Stonecipher in *Broom* are the broadest iterations of this tendency in his writing, but Wallace's appropriation of Barthian and Pynchonian pseudonyms enact the same process at a structural level. The various almost-rhymes, almost-anagrams and gentle echoes of *Infinite Jest*, including Avril and Luria, and Burn's suggestion of the possibly Beckettian Toni/Not-I of *The Pale King* also point to their characters' often unconscious connections with each other and with the world beyond. *Broom's* absent, looming matriarch is nicknamed Gramma, in an obvious nod to her linguistic associations. The periodic intrusions of Dave Wallace, in "Good Old Neon" and *The Pale King* (and possibly in "Westward", as Mark's written avatar) mark yet another version of nominative signposting; while it is perhaps naïve to read these peripheral players as versions of Wallace himself, it certainly invites consideration of the role of the author, working as a destabilizing metafictional gesture within the context of texts almost wholly concerned with the power of language to connect individuals.

From examining the various forms of naming and nomination, it seems clear that nomenclature offers an iteration of the Ricoeurian dynamic explored earlier,

simultaneously declaring the separateness of the self and incorporating it into an onomastic network. To extend this back to Wallace's career-spanning preoccupation with language and solipsism, then, naming perhaps offers a guard against cosmic solitude; what need would we have of names if we were, like Kate in *Wittgenstein's Mistress*, alone? To name oneself, and to be named, is both to distinguish oneself from and to attach oneself to a world of symbolic exchange. From the comic to the literary and philosophical, from the nominatively plural to the wholly anonymous, Wallace's naming practices unite the aesthetics of his work with their ideological impetus, tying this firmly to a broad literary and philosophical heritage. Onomastic networks offer one of the clearest unifying features of his work, as well as providing one of the richest sources of artistic and comic pleasure. As I have shown here, the most overt nominative machinations take place in *The Broom of the System*, and arguably "Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way." Beginning with his earliest writings as both artist and critic, and persisting throughout his career, naming remains a profound and consistent engagement with what it means to be and to speak in the world. What is in a name, then, for Wallace, is little short of everything.

### Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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