

Are we that name ? Some reflections on the use of pseudonyms¹

According to Encarta, pseudonym (literally in Greek a false name) is a 'name that is assumed to hide one's identity'; it was first used by the French, in the mid 19th century – although as we will see the practice certainly predates this in England - and is conventionally used to apply to pen names, or '*noms de plume*' as they are still sometimes called, though why it should be so restricted is not clear. The definition would seem to cover a whole lot of other uses.

Like most dictionary definitions, this one is disarmingly simple. It rests on the notion of duplicity and the intent to conceal. But how is intentionality to be established rather than simply inferred? People who adopt pseudonyms don't tend to go around publicising the fact or discussing their motives, unless for some reason they deliberately want to blow their cover. Equally assuming another name may have the objective effect of hiding aspects of your identity – as is the case when married women adopt their husbands name- but as in this example there may be no intention to do so. And there may in any case be other motives at work, like the desire to abandon a name that is felt to be inappropriate and take on one that feels more comfortable or authentic, or to protect those nearest and dearest from the unwanted repercussions of fame. It can be about re-describing and enhancing aspects of the self rather than hiding them.

There is another dictionary definition which simply defines the pseudonym as 'a fictitious name'. If this is 'fictitious' in the sense of 'created and taken on for the purpose of disguise or deception' then we are in the same difficulty as before. But, more interestingly, it can also mean 'pertaining to fiction, imaginatively produced'. So perhaps the invention of a pseudonym, at least in some of its uses, can be similar to the way a novelist or short story writer creates a name for their characters? This suggestion will be explored further in what follows. Meanwhile it is worth noting that the pseudonym is counterposed to a 'factual' or 'genuine' name – presumably the one on its author's birth certificate- which can be independently corroborated.

Foucault and Kripke

It seems, at first sight as if the literary pseudonym is a good illustration of Foucault's contention that 'the author's name, unlike other proper names, does not pass from the interior of a discourse to the real and exterior individual who produced it; instead, the name seems always to be present, marking off the edges of the text, revealing, or at least characterizing, its mode of being. The author's name manifests the appearance of a certain discursive set and indicates the status of this discourse within a society and a culture.'" - Michel Foucault, '*What is an Author?*'

From this point of view there is no difference between an author's real name and a pseudonym , they both function to define the provenance and identity of the text. Yet if the pen name comes to

¹ Thanks to Ste Thomson, my adoptive son, for the interesting discussions we had on this topic, which made me think a lot more deeply about the issues. I am particularly indebted to him for insights into Eric Blair/George Orwell and the use of virtual names on the Internet. We both had a personal stake in issues of naming and identity. In my case this arose from ambivalence about my 'Jewish' surname (see footnote 4) and from the fact that in the late 1960's when I became briefly a public figure associated with the squatting movement I adopted a pseudonym, Dr John.

have a life of its own once it is inscribed on the title page, the question still arises as to how it got there, whence it came and what role it plays in the life of its author. However provocative Foucault's argument, he forecloses the problem of referentiality; but how are we to understand the special relationship of the author to the text, and of the text to that bit of the world it is about? A theory that cannot tell the difference in ontological status between a writer's real name and life identity and the fictitious name s/he assumes to provide the work with a surrogate author, is not very helpful for present purposes.

A more useful approach is to be found in Saul Kripke's theory of linguistic identity which he develops in his book *Naming and Necessity* (1972). Kripke argues that names stick to the persons to whom they refer because they can always be traced back to some original act of 'baptismal naming' or what he also calls 'dubbing'². This is how Kripke describes the process:

Someone, let's say, a baby, is born; his parents call him by a certain name. They talk about him to their friends. Other people meet him. Through various sorts of talk the name is spread from link to link as if by a chain....a chain of communication going back to the baby himself has been established, by virtue of his membership in a community which passed the name on from link to link.

At the same time names can create their own contexts of reference which exist relatively independently of the baptismal moment, even if they can ultimately be traced back to it³. When someone makes a name for themselves, it means, of course, that a certain public reputation becomes attached to it, and that whenever the name is used by people who are personally unacquainted, it refers to that. Thus 'Albert Einstein' is referred to around the world as the author of the theory of relativity, even by people who do not know anything about his theory or his life. There are, of course, many other people called Albert Einstein, each with their own unique biographies, traceable back to a 'baptismal' moment, but by the same token there is only one Albert Einstein who was born in Ulm on March 14 1876 and while working as a patent clerk in Bern published the research paper which contained the famous equation $E = Mc^2$.

The principle of continuous self-identity is also enshrined in law, since the name on your birth certificate will also appear on your passport and all the other official documents that track your course through life - unless you take official legal steps to alter it. In fact linguistic and legal identity, who you are for family, friends and colleagues in civil society and who you are for the state, are closely enmeshed. This fact can sometimes create great difficulties. This has certainly been the case for children who are adopted and whose surnames are changed to that of their adoptive parents. This used to be accompanied by a prohibition on any contact with or information about the birth parents, thus breaking all links back to their baptismal naming. With the coming of open adoption, this policy was reversed and adoptees were encouraged to stay in touch with their birth parents if

² By this he means the practice of giving someone a new or additional title; the term has many other meanings but they are not the sense in which the word is used here.

³ An example of this is place names: Turnpike Lane was presumably once upon a time a small country lane with a turnpike traffic had to pass through. That has long since vanished, but the name sticks to what is now a busy main road and refers us back to its original 'dubbing'. Similarly the south coast resort of Bournemouth, which was originally so named because it was situated at the mouth of the Bourne, retained its name even though the river, somewhat ungratefully, decided to change its course and now enters the sea several miles from the town.

possible. But they are still deprived of their original family names, and so, not surprisingly, many of them on reaching the age of legal majority, decide to revert to them.

For many people there may be a neat enough fit between their linguistic and legal identities and indeed a strong emotional attachment to their baptismal name, but for others, various kinds of discrepancy can arise between the name on their birth certificate, their existential identity and their public or professional persona. And this is where a space opens up for the creation of pseudonyms.

The genealogy of the pseudonym

Pseudonyms create new linguistic identities but in a way that is almost the antithesis of initial baptismal naming. For this is a do-it-yourself affair in which the name is freely chosen by its bearer, not ascribed to them by virtue of their parentage. The aim in many cases is to ensure that as far as possible the new name cannot be traced back to its originating moment and hence to its originator. Its adoption enables someone to become other than their factual or legal selves. The extent to which this happens varies. Pseudonyms may coexist with existing names, keeping to their own clearly demarcated sphere of activity, or they may be substituted entirely for the original name in an attempt to erase what it has come to represent⁴. In the latter case it may be necessary to construct a whole imaginary biography around the new name, and it is here that the activity comes closest to that of the novelist in creating a fictional character. But in either case pseudonyms remain 'leaky'. There is always the risk that they will be traced back to source, and in the process make their bearers once more identical with themselves. Pseudonyms that are adopted as a temporary expedient do not, for obvious reasons, run the same risk of public exposure. For example, in less permissive times unmarried couples who wanted to spend the night together in a hotel used to sign their names in the register as a fictitious Mr and Mrs, in the full knowledge that they would not be asked for proof of identity.

This second baptism can take many forms and be prompted by a wide variety of circumstance. Sometimes it may have to do with an attempt to conceal or disguise an ethnic or religious identity to which the name itself points, where this is likely to incur discrimination or worse. For example some Jewish immigrants arriving in this country in the 1890's, tried to assimilate by anglicising their names. Cohen became Cowen.⁵

4 There are some things that Kripke's approach, grounded as it is in the tradition of analytic philosophy, cannot – and indeed does not seek to – explain. These have primarily to do with the nature and consequences of our emotional attachment to baptismal names. Kripke has nothing to say about this, but simply assumes that it is there and is relatively unproblematic. But some of the decisions that people take about assuming pseudonyms are not merely matters of rational calculation, but informed by deep seated ambivalences about their original names. In some cases these feelings may also be focussed on the parents who named them. In this event, a second baptism can become a way of disowning one's parentage and the various legacies that go with it. From the psychoanalytic perspective of Jaques Lacan, baptismal naming signifies the initiation of the baby into the symbolic order of language, and its positioning within the field of parental desire. Assuming a pseudonym can thus represent an attempt to re-position oneself outside that field. See Lacan's essay of the name of the father in his 'Writings'.

⁵ Autobiographical note: However my paternal grandfather took the opportunity of being in a new country and in a town where he was unknown to drop his family name, which was Kvaktum, and adopt Cohen, as a name that carried higher status within the Jewish community Personally I have never felt comfortable with my

Baptismal renaming may also be a way of publicly signalling a change of status and identity, one of the rites of passage. So for example when the musician Cat Stevens converted to Islam he changed his name to Yusuf Islam to announce his adherence to the new faith community. He also used this name to perform under. However the fact that he was operating in the same sphere of activity and had an extensive back catalogue under his original name, led to considerable confusion, and much to his chagrin DJ's used to introduce him by referring to his previous incarnation.

Another closely related usage is where the original name has become associated with an unhappy childhood, or other bad experiences, and there is a desire to start afresh, to make a new life for oneself. The pseudonym may be deliberately chosen to evoke a possible world that its creator would like to inhabit, where all difficulties have been magically resolved. In this case the act of renaming is a form of wish fulfilment, and the name itself, often that of a hero or role model, serves as a personification of an ideal self, or in the more extreme case, expresses a desire to be someone else.

Perhaps at this point it is worth trying to distinguish the pseudonym from the anonym, the nickname and the alias. The anonym is defined in the Encarta dictionary as 'an unknown or unacknowledged name', and conventionally is used to refer to any work that is unattributed. Anon is thus quite a prolific author! The Mills and Boon romances, which are written by teams of writers, who, perhaps sensibly, prefer not to be credited with the work, come into this category. So do dictionaries and other references works where contributions are not individually attributed. But the term could equally well be applied to an original name where a pseudonym has successfully replaced it, and rendered it into an incognito as far as the world at large is concerned.

A pseudonym always involves a change of surname, and often of first name. Nicknames are used as substitutes for first names, but never for surnames which are either retained (viz Chalky White) or ignored. The nicknames with which people are dubbed, draw attention, often facetiously, and usually affectionately to some personal characteristic. You may answer to your nickname, and sometimes even adopt it as your own, but it is not a pseudonym. A nickname may also serve to indicate membership of a community. For example amongst beats in the 1960's it was common for people to adopt a 'road name' by which they were known amongst their fellow travellers. This often described where they came from, thus distinguishing Birmingham Dave from Nottingham Dave. Nicknames may also, of course, turn nasty and take the form of insults based on negative stereotypes.

Aliases are trickier. They are part of a special class of illicit pseudonyms. They are normally adopted by people whose original names have acquired public notoriety, and/or who are liable to some form of legal action being taken against them, if recognised. The concealment of identity usually involves creating forged documents - passports, birth certificates etc and even changing or disguising appearance. Also to be included in this class are cases of identity theft, in which

name, since it makes me feel like an impostor. It signifies a Jewish identity I do not possess, my mother being a 'goy' and the 'religious gene' being passed down through the maternal line. Nor was I brought up Jewish in any way. Nevertheless when it was proposed that I exchange my name for someone else's, in order to inherit a lot of money from them, I vehemently refused. However ambivalent I felt about it I was not going to surrender my name! I was subsequently baptised into the Church of England at the age of 14 under my original name. This episode is discussed in a section of my memoir *Reading Room Only* (op cit).

someone else's name and identity is assumed without their knowledge or permission and with the intention to obtain money, goods etc under false pretences.

An interesting variant on the theme of identity theft is where someone adopts another's name because they imagine themselves to actually be that person. Often such impersonators give themselves titles, claim to be VIP's and create a whole imaginary and exotic life history for themselves. As far as they are concerned the 'pseudonym' is their real name, and the name on their birth certificate belongs to someone else; as for the whoever it is who is being impersonated, they are impostors. There is a link here to what Freud called the family romance, and also to the process sometimes described by novelists whereby the fictional characters they create take on a life of their own and become as real to them as the people they actually know⁶.

Finally in a rather different category of illicit names are those adopted by revolutionaries or opponents of repressive political regimes who are forced to operate clandestinely and need to adopt a false identity for this purpose. Subcommandante Marcos is a recent example of a revolutionary who knows how to use a pseudonym creatively for propaganda purposes and indeed in his case it functions more like a pen name or stage name.

Noms de plume

In the cases discussed so far the act of baptismal re-naming takes place in contexts where it would be embarrassing, disadvantageous or dangerous to be recognised and addressed by one's original name. Pseudonyms used within a specific sphere of creative or professional activity, while they are also designed to preserve anonymity, at least initially, have a more positive role to play in projecting a public persona and promoting the work associated with it.

The literary pseudonym is formally detached from its author and attached to his or her work by the law of copyright, which prevents it being reproduced without permission, acknowledgment and usually a fee⁷. It is also adopted, initially at face value, by a community of readers who pass it around and help establish its reputational identity.

Pen names have been taken on for a wide variety of reasons. There may be another, perhaps famous, author with the same name. A budding young novelist blessed with the name of 'Charles Dickens' is likely to want to change it to avoid invidious and unwanted comparison with the author of 'Bleak House'. The original name may also be regarded as a handicap to professional advancement. For example if you have a very common name viz John Smith, or a name that might link you with someone you most definitely do not want to be confused with - viz Charles Manson, then a pseudonym – if not a complete legal name change- might seem called for. Similarly if you have ambitions as a romantic novelist but are unfortunate enough to be blessed with the name of Desiree Snodgrass, you may be inclined to change your surname. Desiree Laplanche sounds so

⁶ In what Freud calls the 'family romance' children invent a set of ideal parents for themselves, usually exotically glamorous, and regard their real parents as impostors. Even without such a genealogical back story, children are very good at inventing pseudonyms and imaginary identities for themselves usually based on characters in stories or computer games. These narratives could be regarded as the prototype for the way novelists go about creating their fictional characters. See Marthe Roberts *The origins of the novel* (1967)

⁷To claim copyright the author has to register the pseudonym at the Copyright Office. Provision is however made to preserve anonymity by leaving the space for the legal name on the registration form blank.

much better! The Victorian novelist we know as 'George Eliot' was in fact Mary Ann Evans, who published her novels under an assumed man's name because she did not want to be seen as a 'women's writer' and thought that in this way her work would be taken more seriously by (male) critics of the day. And many other women writers, such as George Sand, followed her example before the arrival of feminism. Nowadays, though, it is men who are writing under women's names, especially if they want to write romantic novels.

There is also a convention that in the rare case where works of fiction are co-authored they are published under a pseudonym, made up of one author's first name and the other's surname. The explanation usually given for this is that readers expect the work to be the product of a single imagination, and that even if the novel has multiple narrators, its mode of address to the reader essentially remains singular.

There are various situations in which authors may want to disguise, or otherwise protect their true identity. For example under censorious and repressive political regimes, it may only be prudent to publish anything that might be construed as critical or controversial under an assumed name. The use of pseudonyms may also become a literary convention in its own right. In the 18th century, where public debates in this country were largely conducted through the medium of political tracts, it was usual for pamphleteers to sign themselves with such names as 'Veritas', 'An Agitator' or 'The People's Friend'. This tradition is carried on today in the practice of political cartoonists who sign their work under an assumed name.

Pseudonyms have sometimes been used where an author produces work in two very different genres and wants to maintain a separate reputational identity in each. There may be a certain snobbishness about this. In the 1930's there was a Professor of Ancient History at Oxford who produced a series of best selling thrillers under the name of 'Rex Warner'. He may have thought that his reputation as a distinguished classical scholar would suffer amongst his academic peers if they knew he dabbled in such a disreputable kind of popular fiction. Or perhaps the readers of his thrillers would have been put off by the thought that their author was an Oxford don! Eric Hobsbaum, the left wing historian published books and articles on popular music under the name of 'Eric Newton' less for snobbish reasons than because he felt that his interest in jazz represented a different aspect of his personality and giving his writing in this area a separate name helped him do it. Today when the boundaries between high and popular culture have become much more permeable, such versatility would be a cause for celebration, not embarrassment. Nevertheless as we will see, for strictly commercial reasons the practice continues.

The need to disguise or dissociate oneself from one's class background has also played a part in the choice of pseudonym. Eric Blair adopted the pen name of George Orwell because he did not want his 'lower-upper middle class' family, as he described them, to discover that he was spending his time dressing up as tramp, sleeping in doss houses and generally consorting with the poor, the wretched and the social outcast to collect material for *Down and Out in London and Paris*. By his own admission the book was an attempt to expiate his acute sense of guilt at being an old Etonian and coming from a colonial family background. He may also have hoped that his new surname would sound more like one belonging to a man of the people, and earn him some street

cred amongst his informants⁸. Like many left wing intellectuals Orwell/Blair identified with working class struggles but was not willing to give up the privileges associated with what he described as his 'lower upper middle class' background and his position as a man of letters. Assuming a pseudonym enabled him to keep the two worlds apart, and feel at home in both while moving between them more easily than might otherwise have been possible.

For some writers, their pseudonyms may also serve as a psychological defence which enables them to keep their inner creative world intact and separate from the more destructive aspects of their personality. In this sense it functions like a kind of alter ego, giving a name to the imaginative space or 'other scene' that they inhabit when actually writing, although splitting it off in this way may not in fact be the best way to safeguard it. In similar fashion students on creative writing courses are sometimes encouraged to experiment with writing under a new 'by line' to see if this frees up another part of their imagination.

Authors are usually strongly identified with their work, and letting go of it can be a problem. Many writers have described the painful process whereby they emotionally detach themselves from what they have been working on once it is published - the text become something 'out there' in the world, with a life of its own, while they move on to a new project. Attaching a pseudonym to a book can make this process of 'objectification' easier, and possibly less alienating. Pen names can also be enlisted for more extreme kinds of dissociation, as when, for example, someone wishes to publish views they hold but are ashamed of and which might also render them liable to public censure. In these cases discretion is the better part of narcissism. In any event maintaining a literary pseudonym has traditionally been something of a self denying ordinance. It has meant that if the work is acclaimed, then however much personal satisfaction this may afford, the author cannot step forward to receive the plaudits without running the risk that his or her identity will be revealed.

In situations where the author is famous in an unrelated sphere, he or she may not want to use their 'name' because it might bias critical responses to the work, either for better or worse; they use a pseudonym because they want their literary efforts to be judged on their own merit. The same motivation has led well established authors to sometimes publish a book under a pseudonym as an experiment to see how it will fare without the benefit of their literary reputation. Joyce Carol Oates published a novel under the name of 'Rosalind Smith' for just this reason. In contrast where someone has already made a name for themselves in a non literary sphere using a pseudonym, typically a stage name, and then writes a book, usually an autobiography or memoir, the original pseudonym will usually be retained as the pen name. An example would be the actor 'Dirk Bogarde' who, when he retired, made a second career for himself as an author, publishing a series of very distinguished memoirs. At the beginning the public no doubt bought them because of his acting reputation, but soon they were judged on their literary merit alone.

These examples underline the fact that having a pseudonym involves managing a dual identity. Most people seem to do this successfully, but for some the tension between public persona and private self is acute and precipitates a crisis. There are also cases where such a crisis actually prompts the adoption of a pseudonym in an attempt to resolve it. This is what happened to T.E.

⁸ 'George Orwell' was chosen by his publisher from one of four submitted by the writer. It was not unusual, even in the 1930's for publishers to play an active role in creating a public persona for authors on their list..

Lawrence (of Arabia). After he wrote *The Seven Pillars of Wisdom* based on his adventures in the Middle East during the First World War, he became an overnight celebrity, feted by royalty and leading politicians. But the contradiction between his image as a heroic man of action and increasing self doubt about his personal worth proved too much. He abruptly quit his job as an advisor to the Foreign Office and enlisted in the RAF as an ordinary aircraftsman, under the name of Ross. His only desire, it seems, was to get out of the public limelight and seek complete anonymity. He then published *The Mint* under this assumed name – although after his death the publishers restored his real name to the book, because, of course, his work and life were better known within that context of reference. So here, instead of the pseudonym being used to project a public persona as a cover story to protect one's private identity, it is used in the opposite way, as a means of abandoning a 'false' public self, and discovering a more authentic personal one.

Literary pseudonyms may also be adopted tactically as a means of intervention in public debate. There was the case of the English middle aged clergyman, who annoyed by the stridency of some forms of identity politics in the 1980's wrote what purported to be the autobiography of a young black, disabled working class lesbian, and sent it under a suitably assumed name to a radical feminist publishing house. They were on the point of publishing it as the 'authentic voice of young wimmins multiple oppressions' when he revealed his true identity.

Another example of the practice: a few years ago, two well known scientists annoyed by what they saw as the casual and often quite misleading use of scientific ideas and language by contemporary French philosophers in order to bolster their arguments, wrote an article on a suitably post structuralist topic in which they deliberately misused scientific terms in a way that anyone with even a minimum of scientific knowledge would immediately recognise as nonsense. This they submitted under assumed academic names to a prestigious journal which duly accepted it after the usual process of peer review. They then wrote a letter (and subsequently a book) revealing what they had done and denouncing the mystification involved in such pseudo scientific reasoning.

From the literary pseudonym to the by-line

One of the difficulties that arose with literary pseudonyms is the fact that they came to require the construction of pseudo-biographies to go with them. In Victorian times it was possible for even quite successful authors to lead a retiring existence and to rely on their 'noms de plume' to protect it. Books contained little or no information about their authors, usually just a list of previous publications. But gradually more detailed information was included on the fly leaf. At first this was confined to the author's literary interests, influences or accomplishments; but increasingly it concerned his or her life and life style - where they were born and educated, where they lived, whether married and having children, their hobbies etc.

Since the 1970's the marketing of books has been increasingly geared to the promotion of authors. Writers were put under pressure from publishers to give public readings, autograph copies in bookshops, and give interviews, talking about their lives as well as their work. Most went along with it, only too anxious to enjoy whatever public limelight or kudos came their way. Those who wanted to remain anonymous, and let their books to do the talking for them simply refused to

go along with the trend. But the younger generation of contemporary authors recognise that the rules of the literary game have changed.

Nowadays the pen name is primarily a branding device, and much closer to the stage name in being used primarily as a means of promotion. Prolific authors, who may publish several books a year, sometimes in different genres, are often encouraged by their agents and publishers to adopt a different 'by line' for each book, for fear of competing against themselves in an already overcrowded market, or confusing their 'brand image'.⁹ Authors too may want to fine tune their literary personae. Ruth Rendell, for example, publishes her colder, more hard edge thrillers under the name of Barbara Vine. As a result some writers have a whole portfolio of by- lines, although they are unlikely to beat Voltaire, who boasted that he had published under 137 different pen names and could remember every one.

The current practice is in some ways much more transparent. The 'open pseudonym', where authors are quite up front about their pen names, is currently fashionable amongst writers, like Ruth Rendell, who retain their baptismal name for their main work, but use other ones for forays into other fields. There may not even be a pretence at pretence, as when an author signs her book 'Charlotte Maclean writing under the name of Alisa Craig'.

There remains however a tension between the publishers desire to promote the author as a unique 'real life' personality and the need to create brand names for different aspects of their work. One solution is to simply disclose the pen name from the outset. Charlotte Maclean is free to tell readers that she lives in Wales with her husband, two children and a corgi. But for the purposes of maintaining separate brand identities, let alone anonymity, this is entirely self defeating. In theory it is possible to attach the author's real biography and photograph to the fictitious name, but this is tantamount to writing under false pretences. As for simply inventing a life, that means the author has to remain incognito, which defeats the whole object of the commercial exercise. The preferred solution is to revert to the practice of confining biographical information to a listing of previous work published under that name, plus possibly some details of the author's literary influences and tastes.

The replacement of the old style literary pseudonym, which was adopted for life, with the throwaway by-line has been heralded as a sign of 'post modern times' where identities are changed as often and easily as clothes and come just as ready made. Certainly the practice of using multiple names can lead to some very complicated authorial biographies. 'Evan Hunter' was the pseudonymous author of 'The Blackboard Jungle' who went on to write thrillers as 'Ed McBain', whilst retaining his Italian baptismal name – which he was afraid might prejudice readers against him - for his own private use. But the historical example of Voltaire should caution us about jumping to conclusions about how new multiple literary identities are.

The fact that there is a dictionary of literary pseudonyms dealing with popular authors between 1900 and 1980 seems to suggest that even if the practice was quite extensive during this period it was never very good at protecting identities. In traditional terms, the successful pseudonym was

⁹ In popular and genre fiction, where authors often produce series of books featuring the same characters, and brand loyalty is built primarily around them rather than the author, leakage may not be so much of a problem.

one that no-one recognised as such, apart from its author, the publisher and a few trusted intimates who were sworn to secrecy. However, it was soon noticed that when, for whatever reason pen names became public knowledge, far from becoming redundant, they took on a new lease of life. Their disclosure only added to public interest and curiosity about both the author and the work. If they were retained it was partly for this reason and also, of course, because the author's work had already been published and was known under that name¹⁰. Most readers simply accepted it as a 'flag of convenience'. Yet if we remember 'George Eliot' as the author of *Middlemarch*, rather than Mary Ann Evans, it is not only because the pen name remains imprinted on every subsequent edition of the text, but because it has come to represent a certain literary style, a distinctive narrative voice, a reputational identity. In a similar way we refer to certain authors as 'Orwellian' in terms of their vision of the world. In this way the pen name creates its own special context of literary reference for a community of readers who keep it in circulation.

Even where disclosure brings to light discreditable facts about the author's real life, the work itself may have such a strongly established literary reputation that its popularity remains undiminished. One example would be Lewis Carroll, otherwise known as the Rev Charles Dodgson, whose enchantment with Alice and other little girls is now regarded somewhat suspiciously. Another, more extreme case would be Mark Twain, author of the children's classic *Huckleberry Finn*, regarded still as one of the great works in American Literature, but who in real life was a notorious serial killer. This fact is either conveniently forgotten or if known adds a kind of grisly aura to the book.

This raises the broader question as to how far knowledge about the author's life does or should affect the way we read their work. In the case of works of fiction it could be argued that the answer should be not at all. The work should be judged purely on its aesthetic or literary merits. Yet if something unsavoury is known about a novelist, for example about their political sympathies during the 2nd world war, or their misogyny, it may obviously prejudice attitudes to the work; it may not stop people reading it, but the approach to the text may be out of certain prurient curiosity, or in order to detect the signs of author's personal or political flaws. In the case of works of scholarship then perhaps we need to know something about the author's academic credentials and previous publications as offering some kind of guarantee that he or she has done their homework, and their account can be relied upon. And when we come to autobiographies, it is impossible to separate the life from the work.

As we've seen with Dirk Bogarde, an autobiography may be published under a pseudonym which has already established the author's linguistic identity in another context. But no-one adopts a pseudonym for the express purpose of writing their life story! This is because as a genre, the autobiography proposes itself to the reader as an honest account of someone's actual life (even if it is no such thing); there is also a presumption that the author and the narrator are identical (i.e. the six year old whose experiences are being related is the same person as the sixty year old now

¹⁰ There are exceptions to this rule, where an author adopts a pseudonym as a temporary expedient, but then reverts to the baptismal name and establishes a literary reputation with that. For example Dickens published the *Pickwick papers* as a magazine serial under the pseudonym of 'Boz', but then reverted to his real name for its publication as a book. Conversely, an author may publish a lot of work under pseudonyms, but come to be known to posterity for the work published under the baptismal name. This was the case with Voltaire who is now remembered as the author of *Candide*, not for his many pseudonymous works. It may well be that if Voltaire had retained his name for his other publications, they would now be better known.

recalling and writing them down) although they clearly occupy quite distinct positions vis a vis the text. Because of this double constraint, it is a feature of autobiographies published by authors with famous pseudonyms that they involve an act of self disclosure; an account has to be given of life under the original name, hence the need to explain the circumstances in which the pseudonym was chosen, and its impact on the subsequent career.

Stage names and Virtual Names

Stage names are as old as pen names, and have often been adopted for much the same reasons. Et there are some special. in the world of popular entertainment, or what is still sometimes called 'show business', names are expected to be as glamorous or exotic as the 'star personalities' associated with them. Reg Varney would have been unlikely to make it to Number One, however good his act, whereas with 'Elton John' it was a different story. Fans accept that 'Alvin Stardust' or 'Marilyn Manson' are not likely to be the names on their idols birth certificates (especially since 'Marilyn' is a boy) and they simply don't care. They do though want to know the most intimate details of their hero's current personal life. So the stage name does not for a moment provide anonymity, or shelter from the storm of publicity. On the contrary it is designed from the outset to excite attention and to be exploited as a promotional device.

Stage names thus not only invite people to re-describe themselves but encourage linguistic inventiveness or, if you prefer, extravagance. Many of them certainly qualify as fictional, rather than merely fictitious. Just as the Victorian novelists like Dickens and Trollope used to give their characters names which dramatised their personae- Uriah Heep, Mr Gradgrind, Lord Sloth or the Duke of Omnium, rock groups may give themselves names which are evocative of their musical persona – Sid Vicious was an appropriate 'monica' for the punk character in question and Iron Maiden is a good name for a heavy metal band; but sometimes the choice of names is less associative or merely obscure. There is nothing very Dickensian about Uriah Heep, the band, perhaps they just liked the sound of the name! As for literatures itself, it certainly has its larger than life characters, but they have mostly committed their excesses under their own names.

Stage naming may be hard act to follow, although there is no shortage of stars who try hard to live up to it and never stop performing, as they live out their personal psychodramas in front of the cameras. At the other extreme is the semi-reclusive rock or film star who, when not performing, restricts social life to close family and friends and goes to elaborate lengths to remain as far as possible incognito. Meanwhile for those who enjoy only a brief moment of fame, the very extraordinariness of their stage name and persona may make it easier to distance themselves from it when they have to return to a more mundane existence.

Another context in which assumed names are flourishing is the Internet. Here there are many opportunities for people to adopt an on line pseudonym while keeping this quite separate from their 'offline' identity; young people especially may work up a whole virtual persona, sometimes in the form of a fully fledged fictional character which they use as an avatar to represent them in various arenas. Most people, however are less adventurous and simply use Facebook and their blogs as exercises in impression management, projecting a more or less glamourised image of themselves whilst still retaining the core elements of their everyday identity.

With the growth of on line publishing, the literary pseudonym may also get a new lease of life, since it is much more secure in this format than the off line version. So far there is little evidence that authors are transferring names between the two platforms. One exception is Perry9, who is a well known writer on cyberculture both on and off line and has no doubt adopted his electronic name to make a point about the importance of the new media.

Identity politics

Today writers and artists are ever more dependant on the media to publicise and disseminate their work, while their lives and life styles remain an enduring source of public fascination and, on occasion prurient curiosity. But although the need to create some kind of protected space in which to conduct one's life and regenerate creative energies has never been greater, it has become increasingly difficult to achieve. Certainly under these conditions literary and artistic pseudonyms no longer hold out the promise of long term anonymity, even where this is desired.

In our discussion of the traditional literary pseudonym, we described that might be called its natural history, starting with its initial moment of conception and adoption by a community of readers, then the re-emergence of its 'shadow' identity, as first a rumour, then an open secret, leading eventually to the moment of formal public disclosure, tracing it back to source, followed by its long afterlife as a link between its own origin and that of its originator. We also noted how this sequence has recently become drastically compressed or foreclosed: the name is not sooner invented that its fictitiousness is revealed and it become a cultural fact. The value of Kripke's theory is that it shows that this trajectory is not merely contingent on circumstances, but inherent in the way the pseudonym operates as an instance of baptismal naming.: its traceability and 'stickability' are two sides of the same story. So we can read about 'George Orwell aka Eric Blair', or 'Lewis Carroll otherwise known as the Rev Charles Dodgson', safe in the knowledge that these strange hybrid creatures only exist to secure the unique provenance of 'The Road to Wigan Pier' or 'Alice in Wonderland'.

Kripke's theory highlights the fact that the act of naming creates a context of reference in a way that stabilises identity. This does not however mean that he takes an essentialist view of identity. Denise Riley in her book *Are We that Name* has argued convincingly against any reductionist account of the process whereby we negotiate the our socio-linguistic positioning, whether it be in terms of class, gender, or ethnicity and there is nothing in Kripke's thesis to contradict her view. Far from it. He has consistently argued, for example, that we are not identical with our bodies. His theory allows for the fact that people, unlike objects, can rename themselves and create other possible worlds in which to exist. He is not however suggesting that we can go about re-inventing ourselves at will. For these possible worlds, in so far as they do not remain purely imaginary constructs in our heads, always have to be given a local habitation as well as a name, have to be embodied in actual practices, and located within the constraining circumstances of a particular life.

Indeed another important implication of the theory is that practices of naming and hence linguistic identities are always socially and culturally embedded in speech communities. Even where they appear to float free and create their own terms of reference, as in the case of pseudonyms, their genealogy remains anchored in a specific set of traceable elements. Practices of naming vary greatly between cultures. Islamic societies, for example, the use of pseudonyms is considered a blasphemous insult to one's God given name and as such is banned. Some practices may be

fiercely contested. Take, for example, the feminist attack on patronyms. In this country fifty years ago it was almost unheard of for single mothers to give their children their own name instead of their fathers, or for married women to retain their maiden name. Today it is perfectly acceptable, and in some circles, the norm.

This brief survey of the pseudonym has revealed a diversity of possible motives and rationales from protecting privacy to publicising one's act, from the desire to attain a more authentic existence to becoming someone else. We have seen how fashions and conventions of use change along with the times. The discussion of the literary pseudonym revealed an essential paradox : that it is never more alive and well than when it has ceased to perform the role for which it was originally designed. The history of the pseudonym bears eloquent witness to the ingenuity with which linguistic identities are invented and transformed, but also to the continuing human need for stable reference points in an increasingly uncertain world.

References / Further reading

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