

The Master of Names

I

Denomination

Most weekday mornings I go for a power walk in the neighborhood, up a long hill to the cemetery and back. I dread it, but I force myself to do it anyway, because it is my only form of exercise. I know I should start swimming again, as I was doing last year, and - now that it is summer in Seattle, and the weather is fine - bike-riding as well. But when it comes to exercise, I find myself growing increasingly lazy, and the walk takes only a half-hour both ways. What's more, the return trip downhill is a piece of cake, so there are really only 15 minutes of pain - up the hill to the top in four steep, short sections, with a long, level block between the first and second sections. (The second is the steepest, and worst.) The third section consists of 40 stairs, broken up by a short landing in the middle. The fourth is a gentler final stretch of about 200 feet, after which it's one more long block to the edge of the cemetery. I don't go into the cemetery; the walk there is enough.

I've been doing this walk for six months now, since moving to hilly Seattle from the flats of Long Island. I

see the hill as a kind of marker of my move - another signpost of the recent and profound change in my life, which I made to join the woman who was my fiancée, and now is my wife. The same walk, up and down, three or four times a week. I know it should probably be five, but I can't bear not to give myself Fridays off; it's my non-observant Jew's version of shabbat, marking the start of the weekend. By now the walk has become quite boring, so to offset the boredom - or maybe just to acknowledge it - I have taken to labeling the different parts. I call them "phases", because it sounds more taxonomic that way, and taxonomy is something I have always been attracted to (in the way of a non-scientist). The landings and level stretches separate the different phases of the walk. There are also, as differentiators, the "trip out" and the "trip back"; the cemetery marks the exact midpoint. Thus there are (to name the first half of the walk - "out" - following the taxonomy in proper order): Ramp (this is the slight incline before the start of Phase One); Phase One; Phase One, Level Stretch; Phase Two (the steepest part of the hill); Phase Two, Landing (very short, just in front of the stairs); Phase Three (stairs, Parts One and Two - 19 and 20 steps, respectively, separated by the stair landing); Phase Three, Level Stretch (also short, just crossing the street); Phase

Four (the last section of the hill, and the easiest); and Phase Four, Level Stretch - the last long block to the cemetery. And then the whole thing all over again, in reverse (denominated "back").

"Denomination" is what I have come to call my system of naming the different parts of things. In this case, denomination is a way of alleviating - or perhaps just confirming - the boredom of the walk (which I call "The Trudge", when it's not raining; when it is, I call it "The Slog"). And if all of this itself strikes you as boring - as well as slightly insane and O.C.D. -- welcome to the club! For denomination is intimately connected with boredom - a way of trying to avoid it, while at the same time marking it.

But denomination is more than just a mode of boredom; it's also - more importantly - a way of seeing and understanding my experience, and goes farther than just naming the different parts of The Trudge/Slog. It extends to all sorts of other things as well. Denomination, in fact, is an integral part of what I call "biographization", which is the tendency, and the wish, to see my life as if it were a biography, being told by someone who both is and isn't me. Just as a biography restructures its subject's life into a greater semblance of order for the reader, so

biographization helps me feel that my own life might hold a larger pattern not immediately discernible to me, the liver.

Slightly insane and O.C.D., I know. But I suspect, weird as all of this is, that I am not entirely alone in this habit of thought. I have written more about biographization elsewhere, and so won't rehearse the details here. Suffice it to say that I suppose we all have our ways of marking our sense of status, self-importance, and even meaning, be it through money, possessions, occupation, or whatever other existential signifiers you choose. Biographization is just my way. Others might imagine themselves in a movie, or performing onstage, or leading a movement. (Or none of the above.) But I persist in believing that the romantics among us - and I am nothing if not a romantic - may harbor egocentric conceits of the sort I describe. Such fantasizing is one of the occupational hazards of being a romantic. Keats, in a letter to his friend Richard Woodhouse, identified Wordsworth's poetry as an instance of the "egotistical sublime". I think that's a pretty good definition of the kind of thinking I have in mind. Romanticism contains a healthy (or unhealthy, depending on your point of view) dose of egocentricity; and it is one of the functions of

denomination to serve as a kind of corrective to egocentricity. I don't say it is always an effective corrective - the denominating egocentric remains an egocentric, notwithstanding his efforts at self-correction. (I say "his" because the kind of egocentricity I'm talking about seems to be more the province of the male.) But I suggest that the taxonomic element in denomination represents an effort to lend a kind of objectivity to the romantic's subjective conceits. Denomination could be seen as an attempt to establish a version of what T.S. Eliot called an "objective correlative" - that thing in the outer world that confirms the truthfulness of one's representations.

Not necessarily a successful attempt, mind you. Denomination names nothing new (or even real) in the world. It's just a game I play with myself - a game to allay and/or mark the boredom, to pass the time. "Just" a game? Only a game? No, I think it's more than that, as I will try to show. (Though we should never underestimate the life-importance of games.) At the heart of the denominational project, as I have come to conceive of it, is the search for meaning. Meaning, and control. (The former being more important than the latter; but the latter being not without significance, either.) Meaning, control

and order. Order is the essence of taxonomy, which is the ordering of things in the world, for the purposes of science. (That is to say, for the purposes of understanding and knowledge.) Now Senator, I am no scientist; but I do strive, in my own way, for understanding, and knowledge, and meaning. And denomination -- the denominational project -- is part of that search.

As I see it, denomination is also a part of biographization. To name things, to identify them, is to give us a handle on them; and a handle is useful for grasping and manipulating, in imagination, the things of our lives. I say "the things of our lives", but without any evidence that those things - such as the stages, the phases of my walk - are real. Yes, the hill is real - all too real - but its division into different parts is entirely of my own making, and elaborated for my own entertainment. Totally gratuitous. For the hill is no different for my naming of its parts. Ah yes -- but my experience of it, of walking up and down the hill, is nevertheless affected by my denomination of it. True, the effect is entirely subjective - but no less real for all that.

I am aware I am gaming the system here - literally, I am making a game of it - for my own purposes of passing the time, and entertaining myself. It is all a game, and as such it shares in the qualities of being both gratuitous and urgent -- as any game worth its salt must be.

But is the game rendered any more urgent - or any more meaningful, for that matter - by the assignment of names to it? Is this not just an illusion? I hope not. The assignment of names is an integral part of the game - it is the game, in fact; and the game is partly about meaning, and control. One might even say that its meaning is control. In a sense, it's not really a game at all. For do we not all seek meaning in, and some measure of control over, our experience? That impulse - to seek control and meaning - is at the center of denomination, and biographization.

You may object here that I'm being too serious, and missing, in my disquisition, the spirit of a game, which is about having fun, and passing the time, and alleviating boredom - not about trying to find meaning in life. Games are fun precisely because they have no larger meaning. The meaning of a game, if there is one, lies simply in the fun you have while playing or watching it. True enough. Only a fool, or a pedant - a pedantic fool - would look for the

deeper meaning in a game. Any meaning there happens to be inheres in the quality of the experience, and stops there. The point is entertainment. Point taken.

But there are games, and there are games. The specific qualities of the entertainment must also be taken into account. There is, for example, the game of chess. The game of bridge. The game of go. These games have an entertainment factor, certainly - if they didn't, they wouldn't be games; they would be just a kind of homework. Objects of study. Things of the intellect only. And with such things we find it hard to play. Tiresome. Heavy. Things of the intellect are heavy, while the spirit of games is light, playful, free. Pleasurable. Fun.

But there are also such things as games of the intellect. And can't some games of the intellect include all of those aforementioned "game" qualities as well? Doesn't it all just depend on who is playing, and watching? And is there, after a certain point, even any meaningful distinction between player and audience? Aren't they both just part of a greater whole? And couldn't we maybe call that greater whole "art"?

Whoa there, cowboy. It was not my intention to enter into a philosophico-aesthetic dissertation here. I'm getting in over my head. The subject, after all, was just

a game - the naming game I play to take my mind off the boredom of my power walk. And now I seem to be stuck in precisely the sort of head-game that the tutelary spirit of games - the magister ludi, if you will; the Master of Games - has declared himself against. Against taking games too seriously. Maybe my obsession with order, and meaning, is just a kind of pedantic bedevilment. Maybe I'm looking for meaning in all the wrong places - starting with games. Doesn't the pleasure of games lie precisely in the fact that they are an escape from the kind of meaning I am trying, misguidedly, to impose on them?

But what about the more intellectual games I mentioned above - chess, bridge, and go? Certainly they are different from sports games. (Though sports games also contain an intellectual element: strategy.) And it seems one is more prone to attribute meaning - larger meaning, "deeper" meaning, "life meaning", if you will - to intellectual games.

I just used the term "magister ludi" - "master of the game". Now Magister Ludi was actually the first English title of one of my favorite novels, The Glass Bead Game, by Hermann Hesse. The novel tells the story of a fictitious game - a quintessentially intellectual game - that is also an art. One of the things I love about the novel - and

part of its genius, I think - is that the game, and the art, remain unspecified, and rather vague. We are given to understand that it has to do with pattern, structure and design, and ranges over many different fields, including graphic art, music, history, mathematics - any discipline, in fact, that its players can successfully apply it to.

Another thing I love about this book is that it's told in the form of a biography: the biography of magister ludi Joseph Knecht, citizen of the fictional intellectual utopia of Castalia. And as you read the novel, the story of Knecht and the Glass Bead Game gradually assumes the quality of a myth - a myth of culture, civilization, history, intellectuality, individual growth, art and the artist (to name only a few). Yet the precise nature of the game at the center of the story remains tantalizingly just out of reach. And it is this fundamental ungraspability, I think, that is the source of the book's appeal. It knows enough not to assign any specific meaning to the game, or ever to state its rules or structure. But this vagueness ends up being suggestive and intriguing, rather than confusing. It is the intriguing suggestiveness of artists like Wordsworth and Wallace Stevens, or Joseph Cornell and his evocative, mysterious boxes - perfect yet unfathomable

worlds unto themselves - or the haunting, dreamy music of Debussy.

But I seem to have wandered far afield now from the track of my walk, and the topic of its partition. Games, boxes, poetry, art, music - "worlds unto themselves" indeed, all of them. There is something so appealing about these miniature universes, extending their feelers out into the larger world we all share - separate, yet connected and communicating, like our individual lives. Dioramas in a museum, each exhibit a different life, merely glimpsed (or studied, lingeringly) by the museum-goer as she strolls through the museum. The life-size dioramas at the Natural History Museum in New York were always a favorite of mine as a child. I would visit them with my grandmother, when I came to New York with my parents. I loved the specificness of each setting: "White Mountains, New Hampshire, early summer, morning"; "Delaware River Valley, fall, late afternoon". Certain dioramas, for no discernible reason, would occasion a reverie. I loved the way the animals and vegetation in the foreground blended seamlessly into the painted background. I loved also the atmospheric of time and place, fixed eternally in the perfect, enclosed world of the diorama, named and labeled precisely for the viewer to ponder as she stopped in her visit. Maybe I got my

taste for naming and compartmentalizing from those childhood trips to the Natural History Museum. In any case, it is a taste that has stayed with me ever since.

Denomination, you will recall, is part of biographization. It is the practice of naming the parts of our lives - ordering and structuring our understanding of them, in somewhat the same way that biographers do for the lives of their subjects. And so, after the manner of biographers, I have divided my life up into parts. (Sounds a little like Eliot's Prufrock, doesn't it? "...I have measured out my life with coffee spoons...") Just like the walk. Except when I divide up my life, I call the parts "periods". (This is called "periodization", and it's also a part of biographization, as well as a method of denomination.) For example, there is the Major Period - the 23 and a half years that I spent with my first wife, Diane, during which our son Zack - our only child - was born, and I went to graduate school, and Zack went to preschool, and kindergarten, and first grade, and then we moved across the country and I began my career as a college professor. Then Diane died of metastatic breast cancer, and that began the Minor Period, which lasted 11 years - years of loneliness, punctuated by several serious yet transitory relationships, which helped but did not

eradicate the loneliness - until I met Julie, who was to become my wife, and did become my wife, a week ago. I call this period the Julistic Period, because it is characterized by Julie, and the study of Julie. (Which is denominated "Julistics". I am, therefore, a Julisticist.) There are other periods as well. The 26-year period after I was born, and before I met Diane, is denominated the pre-Major Period. (Of course there were many sub-periods within the pre-Major Period, but I'll spare you the details.) There was also (so far) one short sub-period within the Julistic Period, after I'd met Julie, but before I'd moved from Long Island to Seattle to join her. This is called The Separation Phase. (Phases are shorter than periods.) And so on, and so forth. (Und so weiter, as the German life-taxonomists - Die Lebentaxonomisten -- might say.)

I know, I know -- it is all so gratuitous, and arbitrary, and trivial, and self-indulgent, and egocentric, and self-aggrandizing, and conceited, and silly, and romantic (in the worst sense of the word, meaning self-deluded). I mean, who really cares about any of this - other than me? Nobody, I'll be the first to admit. Nobody but me could ever possibly care about any of this shit. (Unless some of it were possibly to get mentioned in some

future biography of me. Then, presumably, at least the biographer and editor, and maybe even some of the readers, would care. That's one of the things biographization can do for you. It can make others care about your life, and therefore make you feel a little better about it, too. It's necessary, you see, for me to feel better about my life. Truth be told, I feel like a failure. I have felt this way for many years. And part of the impulse behind biographization is to help me feel better about myself, and to be able to live with myself. But that's another subject, for another day.)

II

The Contrôlleur, and the Imp

The French (themselves masters of denomination) have a phrase - a label, actually: "appellation d'origine contrôllée" - that they attach to wines, cheeses and other agricultural products to designate their provenance, and - more importantly - to guarantee their authenticity. It's a way of assuring the customer that they are getting the genuine article. Thus a wine labeled "Bordeaux" can only be grown and bottled in the Bordeaux region; a cheese designated as "Roquefort" must be made from ewes' milk and

aged in the Cambalou caves near the town of Roquefort-sur-Soulzon, in the South of France; and products identified as containing real lavender can only come from four specific départements -- also in the South of France. The assignment of these labels is under strict government control.

This whole system - its genesis, rationale and enforcement - is so utterly French in its nomenclatural precision, any deviation from which is punishable by law, through the appropriate authority. ("Il ne faut pas -- ! Défense de -- !") One imagines so clearly the Gallic wagging of the finger and clucking of the tongue; and one is so tempted, by the same token, to instinctually rebel and violate the imposed norms, just for the hell of it. ("Putain, je me fous de vos lois de merde!")

But my rebellion is merely notional, for the truth is that in matters denominational, I am much more inclined to conform than resist. The French exactitude calls to me in all its pedantic unexceptionalism; "Monsieur le Contrôleur, c'est moi!" In my lived life, I may be a slob -- my house unkempt, my schedule awry -- but in the life of my mind, all is in order, all is comme il faut. The Master of Names - "Le Contrôleur des Appellations" - is in his heaven, and all's right with the world.

Or so I would like to think. But the Imp of the Perverse (as that Francophile Edgar Allen Poe styled it) gnaws at my mind, and tells me it ain't so. We all want to impose some sort of order on our experience (or at least discover an order in it); in various ways, we try to do this; and we may even succeed, now and then, in making sense of our lives. But any larger order - either imposed or discovered - remains provisional, and is not of the essence. The raw, natural life sprawls, arms and legs akimbo, fractious and intractable. Experience is unruly; it is only the more superficial materials of life - the outward appearances -- that can be molded and directed. To know, to fully register, that one is eating a genuine Roquefort, accompanied by an authenticated Bordeaux, conveys an undeniable - indeed, certifiable - sense of satisfaction, security, and therefore comfort. But is this not also - this desire for security and comfort through authentication, control, verification, naming, denomination, call it what you will -- is this desire not also a desire to have one's subjective experience of the moment ratified by some higher authority? And is this desire not also, basically, bullshit? For who, or what, in turn will validate that higher authority? Who controls the controllers? Quis convalidabit convalidantes ipsos?

Besides, I am an American; I bridle at the notion of a controller - any controller, especially of experience. I am also a Francophile, yes - but not so much of one that I will submit to having my appellations contrôllées by anyone -- even myself, qua denominator. Out of one side of my mouth I say, "Monsieur Le Contrôlleur, c'est moi!" Out of the other, "Monsieur Le Contrôlleur, je me fous de vos lois de merde!" The Master of Names is dead! Long live the Master of Names!

III

The Example of Dostoyevsky

If the controlling impulse aims at ordering, then it seems to me that the Imp of the Perverse -- following Dostoyevsky this time -- aims at freedom. And the instinct for freedom is not to be denied - even if it involves suffering. Perhaps especially if it involves suffering. Dostoyevsky railed against the social engineers of his day - the Chernychevskys, the Comptes, the Fouriers - who sought to abolish human suffering, or at least drastically reduce it. And though I abhor Dostoyevsky's politics, and his theodicy, I revere his fiction, the life of his mind and art. He moves me as an artist, as only an artist can. He

moves me as one who suffers, and understands the place of suffering. And here you have the paradox. It is the sufferer -- in this case, the sufferer from boredom -- who conjures up the Imp of the Perverse, in resistance to the control of the social engineers; but it is the same sufferer who invokes the Master of Names, the Contrôleur des Appellations. The Imp and the Master are both fighting against boredom, but using very different means to combat it. The Imp uses the explosive of freedom, the Master the ordering principle of denomination. And the Imp and the Master - tous les deux, c'est moi!

Now to attempt to draw a parallel between the controlling strategies of, say, Dostoyevsky's Grand Inquisitor and my Master of Names would surely be going too far. The Grand Inquisitor, after all, was an arch-villain - a kind of evil genius. In the name of power and comfort - the power of the Catholic Church, the comfort of the masses - he condemned Christ to death again, at the Second Coming. The Master of Names - disguised as myself - intends no such villainy. The game he plays is harmless and inconsequential, and the intellectual means at his disposal are modest ones. He means primarily to combat boredom - the boredom of the power walk - and in the process to elevate a tiny bit of his - my - own life,

through an act of denomination, naming the small parts of my walk, as I have named the larger periods of my life.

But the Grand Inquisitor, clever as he was, did not fully foresee the consequences of his plan of action. According to him, Christ was a threat to the order and power of the Church, because he offered individuals freedom and salvation. The Church could not abide the threat to its authority that such an offering represented, so it got rid of the offerer -- in the bargain saving the masses from the suffering entailed by freedom. And in Dostoyevsky's view, the Grand Inquisitor's reckoning was correct: if given the choice, most people - the masses - will choose comfort and enslavement over the suffering that freedom brings.

What the Grand Inquisitor apparently did not take into account, however, was that comfort leads to boredom, and people will eventually - if their boredom is great enough - go to considerable lengths (even as far as personal suffering) to alleviate it. This was the insight of Dostoyevsky's Underground Man, who saw that spite and self-destruction - two of freedom's negative modes - were effective ways to alleviate the boredom of Western life. As anyone who has read him knows, Dostoyevsky was no liberal democrat. And I wonder what he would have thought

of my Master of Names. He probably would have seen him - if he cared to notice him at all - as yet another despicable product of Western society, lulled into boredom - and therefore anomie, which is a kind of spiritual death - by the pernicious side-effects of Western comfort and well-being. But I think he would have taken the boredom seriously. And so do I.

Now Senator, I am no Dostoyevsky. But I like to think he would have appreciated where the Master of Names was coming from: a place of boredom, with all its attendant sufferings (though certainly not on the order of an Ivan Karamazov, or an Underground Man). He would also have understood the need to give one's life a greater sense of meaning - though for Dostoyevsky, that would have had to come through the grace of God (not through denomination and biographization).

But the Lord works in mysterious ways. For me, he takes the form of an ordering principle - call it the Master of Names. The Master is often whimsical; though his name is control, I do not pretend to control him. He ordereth the partitions of my life, and deviseth the denominations thereof; he confereth pattern and rationale, where I can see only chaos and confusion. He giveth order, and taketh away the dross of happenstance. He constructeth

the dioramas of my life, and nameth them accordingly. Yea, he is more than I - well more - but he discerneth value in my littleness, and worthiness in my days. One day he may even write, or cause to be written, my biography - the story of my life; and though I will not be around to read it, the hope of it gives my life comfort and meaning. Praised be the Master of Names.