

NAMING AND THE UNNAMABLE¹

Mladen Dolar

There is an insect, a beetle that lives in some caves in the northeastern Slovenia (I apologize for starting with a parochial case from my home country). It is a Slovene autochthonous species, existing only in five remote caves in Slovenia and nowhere else in the world. Such indigenous species are a rarity that countries are usually proud of, it's the question of national patrimony. This particular beetle really doesn't raise any expectations of pride and glory, it's an unobtrusive unremarkable creature, not appealing in any way, rather the opposite, and it appears it doesn't seem remarkable even to entomologists, the professionals who get excited about bugs (a passion I don't share). It measures about half a centimeter and it is a predator, mostly eating other insects' larvae. It's a most unlikely hero, yet a hero it is, and its claim to fame is based solely on its name. Its scientific designation is 'namely' *Anophthalmus hitleri*. *Anophthalmus* means 'eyeless', 'blind' (cf. ophthalmology), it doesn't need eyes in the pitch dark, and *hitleri* means what you imagine it means. It was discovered in the early 1930s by a Slovene naturalist Vladimir Kodrič who couldn't classify it, so he sold it to a German collector Oscar Scheibel who realized its importance and got all excited at coming across a new species. Being the first one to describe it and establish its brand he was in the exceptional position of Adam, being able to name an animal, and the name he would chose would stick and endure. According to his political persuasions he named the beetle after the recently appointed *Reichskanzler* Adolf Hitler, and this is how this most unremarkable bug got the most remarkable name, *Anophthalmus hitleri*. Taxonomy is a serious and very strict business, and once a species has been named – and the privilege of its naming belongs exclusively to the first one who

1. Afgedrukte tekst is de letterlijke weergave van een lezing gegeven op 13 juni 2018 in het kader van de studiedag "Over taal en psychoanalyse" georganiseerd door het Gezelschap voor psychoanalyse te Gent.

described it – once a species has been named there is no way that a name could be changed, it is called what it is called for all (scientific) eternity. The regime of naming, which is a cultural invention and convention, shares in this respect the immutability with the natural species, resistant to social, political and cultural tides and vicissitudes. No name change in nature, there is a real in the name and it has to be a rigid designator, to use Saul Kripke's term, as rigid as it gets (but even Kripke didn't imagine it to be that rigid). "Several proposals were made after World War II for the beetle to be renamed, but the International Commission on Zoological Nomenclature has stood firm. It turns out that, in order to retain consistency in scientific sources, Latin designations of species cannot be changed once a name has been registered."² The individual specimens die, the species may become extinct, but the names are carved in scholarly stone. No fiddling with the cultural convention which as if turned into a law of nature. The political views of the name-giver thus became ineradicable, this is one instance where an ordinary human can step in the shoes of the Platonic name-giver (as it features in *Cratylus*).

So given this name the beetle has become very famous, it has reached a worldwide notoriety and it is one of the prominent items for the collectors of Nazi memorabilia. A good specimen can reach very high prices, thousands of euros. So we have the surrealistic scene of neo-Nazis trying to climb into these damp caves themselves, but this is a tedious time-consuming business demanding expertise, so mostly they try to bribe local lads to do it for them. It appears it can take a month of careful search to get a good specimen. Even the items exhibited in natural science museums are not safe, there have been attempts at burglary (notably in Munich where they have the largest collection). As a consequence of this the species has become endangered and is currently probably on the brink of extinction, merely on the basis of its name. It is protected by Slovene law, but the law is hard to enforce.³

The Hitler beetle is not the only animal named after Hitler, there is also a *Rochlingia hitleri*, a flying insect fossil (*paleodictyoptera*),

2. Cf. <http://www.rtvsllo.si/news-in-english/slovenia-revealed/a-beetle-endemic-to-slovenia-is-named-after-adolf-hitler/330617> (10 April 2015). "A name is a name, really," (!!) says Dr Andrew Wakeham-Dawson of the ICZN in London. "There are people with the surname Hitler. It's not a swearword or an innuendo." I guess Dr Wakeham-Dawson, an Englishman, must have read his Shakespeare. (The source is Rose George blog, posting an article published in *The Independent*, 13 April 2002)

3. A Slovene artist, Jasmina Cibic, presented an artwork based on this case at the Venice Biennial in 2016.

named in 1934, but with its being a fossil it is impossible to find and only a couple of examples exist. It started its career by being already dead and extinct, so it can't compete. As an aside, there are other species named after prominent politicians. In 2005 three newly-discovered types of slime mold beetle were named after the members of the then US administration: *Agathidium bushi*, *Agathidium cheneyi* and *Agathidium rumsfeldi*. "All done with the greatest of respect, of course, claim the scientists at Cornell University, who named them."⁴ The scientists were poker-faced, and the general assumption was that this was a joke, one cannot quite believe that the renowned entomologists didn't know about the illustrious precedent. Yet it appears that these bugs didn't attract collectors' frenzy so far and are in no danger of extermination. There is furthermore a moth called *Neopalpa donaldtrumpi*, whose head color reminded the scientists of Trump's hair (it was given this name in January 2017 when Trump was still President elect).⁵ It still remains to be seen how collectors will react. But Oscar Scheibel wasn't joking, although it's hard to see how naming a small repellent blind bug after the *Führer* can be taken with a straight face. Scheibel wrote a letter to the *Führer*, describing his exploit and venting his admiration, and the *Führer* actually wrote a letter thanking him for this great honor.

This Hitler beetle is, by the way, not to be confused with the other kind of Hitler beetle, across the big boundary between nature and culture, namely the Volkswagen Beetle, and you know the story of Hitler's stark support for the *Volkswagen*, 'the people's car' project in the 1930s, and in particular for the Beetle, the type that almost got going in 1939, but whose birth was prevented by the beginning of the war (allegedly there was only one specimen actually produced before the war, a convertible version, duly presented to the *Führer*). After the war Hitler's pet Beetle proliferated, vastly outnumbering its natural counterpart – there were 21,5 million Beetle cars produced 1945-2003, while the other Hitler beetle was increasingly struggling for survival,

4. The source is (again) *The Independent*, 19 August 2006. As weird names go, there is e. g. *Bufo naria borisbeckeri* (a marine snail) and a host of others – Mick Jagger, Kieth Richards, Michael Jackson, Bill Gates, Frank Zappa, Johnnie Rotten, Sid Vicious, Paul McCartney, John Lennon, Ringo Starr, Freddy Mercury, Miles Davis, Harrison Ford etc., all of them have an animal, including Karl Marx. For the whole list cf. https://sl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Seznam_živali,_poimenovanih_po_slavnih_osebah.

5. According to Vazrick Nazari, the Canadian scientist who named it, he wanted "to bring wider public attention to the need to continue protecting fragile habitats in the US that still contain many undescribed species." (Wikipedia)

with possibly only a few dozen remaining. The success and the world spread of the one coincided with the catastrophic decline of the other.

Here we have a very good introduction into the problem of naming – does the name merely designate an entity, an entity that has to be properly described with all its properties and classified by *genus proximum* and *differentia specifica*? If this were the case the name would just serve as a handy shorthand for a very long description. Or can it be that the name can acquire the status of a property of the thing named, attached to the entity itself as one of its features, even the key feature deciding its destiny, its life and death? This is a rather spectacular case of the Cratylan thesis, the thesis put into the mouth of Cratylus by Plato in the dialogue of that name, namely that names are not mere arbitrary conventions but are attached to the entities named with an umbilical cord, they can only be ‘correct’ if they evoke the properties of the entity by linguistic means, by their sound value or by their etymology. So what property does the qualifier *hitleri* evoke in the bug, what in the bug does it refer to? Apart from it being a predator, this is a more complicated case than what Cratylus ever envisaged, namely the case where the name itself becomes an agent of extermination, of the disappearance of the thing named. The name has turned into the operator of the final solution regarding this bug, both highly desired and repulsive, so quite in line with the person in question. The extermination on the basis of name alone – this is a name not evoking some feature of its referent, but provoking one, namely its near annihilation – at the same time with its ‘eternal’ conservation/consecration in the mausoleum of collectors’ veneration.

One can imagine an interior monologue of this beetle: ‘I have done everything according to the book, I read my Darwin, the survival of the fittest, and I have been ever so fit to survive, I have been around for hundreds of millions of years⁶ in the harshest conditions, and these damp dark caves really don’t offer much in terms of survival. I am a winner in the battle for survival, despite the rough deal, but now this thing came along, an external calamity, the name. I did nothing wrong, yet I may become extinct. The natural selection is supposed to be the name of the game, according to Darwin, but this is really a case of the most unnatural selection. I can’t be held responsible for my name,

6. It is estimated that the class of insects originated 480 million years ago in the Ordovician period, the first flying insects around 400 million years ago (this is also the period of the first insect fossils). Most extant orders of insects appeared in the Permian period, more than 250 million years ago, and most extant families in the Jurassic period, 200-150 million years ago.

haphazardly given to me by some idiot a few decades ago, a millisecond in terms of evolution – or should I?’

So this monologue could naturally continue by extending to the question: “What’s in a name?”, like Juliet on the balcony. “It is nor hand, nor foot, / Nor arm, nor face, nor any other part / Belonging to a man”. ‘It is nor head nor legs nor antennae nor thorax nor carapace nor any other part belonging to a bug.’ Dissect the bug, you won’t find the name, yet the name can be fatal, the non-existent part that can kill. “What’s in a name? That which we call a rose / By any other name would smell as sweet.” ‘That which we call *Anophthalmus hitleri* by any other name would look just as miserable – but it would survive.’ And the tragedy of Veronese lovers is after all the tragedy of having the wrong name, and having a wrong name being lethal.

We can imagine another extension of this monologue by another Shakespeare’s heroine. “Am I that name, Iago?” asks Desdemona. “Iago: What name, madam? Desdemona: What my lord said I was. Emilia: He called her whore.” (IV, 2) Othello, Desdemona’s jealous husband, has called her whore, and Desdemona is horrified not simply at being called that name, but at the fact that this name sticks. She has done nothing wrong, there is no basis whatsoever for being called that name, yet having been called that she finds herself in a position where she has become that name, she has been tainted by it, with no possibility to escape this stain, this stigma, this smear. ‘Am I that name?’ can be seen as a paradigmatic question of the hysteric, the basis of the hysterization that a subject must undergo by entering into language, into the regime of names. A name assigns a symbolic mandate, and the hysterical question points to the structural predicament of never being up to the mandate, up to assuming the symbolic role ascribed by the name. How can I be what I am called? The name is thrust upon me, it is imposed, it fixes me, it transfixes me, yet my subjectivity cannot be pinned to it, exhausted by it, hence the hysterical impasse – the subject has no identity apart from the imposed name, but the subject without identity can only assert itself by being irreducible to the name that imposes an identity. The name identifies and at the same stroke provokes a crisis of identity, the impossibility of identification. It is like ‘S1+’, where the + stands for the subject, represented by the signifier but not identified by it. ‘Am I that name’ evokes in pure form the division of the subject, the division into the signifier, S1, the name, and the other part which has no substance of its own, which is merely represented by the signifier, yet irreducible to it. S1+0, but an unnullable zero. In the case of Desdemona it is not the high mandate

that she is not able to assume (however much she would want to), it's at the opposite end, the obverse side, the lowly vulgar swearword that is attached to her and however much she would want to be rid of it, she can't. The name produced a 'whoreness' in her, not based on any actual property, but solely as a product of name-calling. The name has the capacity to stick to the thing, becoming its part, and there is no chance to remove the stain once planted there. Hence the old adage *audacter calumniare, semper aliquid haeret*, 'slander boldly, something always sticks.'⁷ (The adage in this form stems from Francis Bacon paraphrasing a passage in Plutarch.) Name-calling always hits the mark, not by pinpointing and highlighting some trait that was already there, but by creating one that was not there before, producing a referent by the act of naming.⁸ – This situation is the flipside of the hysterical question, for 'Am I that name?' in hysteria points to the impossibility of measuring up to the name and its symbolic mandate, while with name-calling everyone is sadly up to it, helplessly pinned to it, there is no way of escaping its mark, however much one may vainly protest.

So the poor beetle found itself rather in Desdemona's situation, the monstrous name producing a specter of Hitler in it, a most unlikely property given the miserable outlook of the tiny bug, putting it in a position of being both loathed and coveted, the specter turning lethal. Whether Juliet or Desdemona, in any case it is a tragic hero, despite its creaturely lowly status of a bug, a pest.

Perhaps the most curious feature of this most curious story is that the *Führer* himself acknowledged this naming, thereby acknowledging his namesake, recognizing himself in this expansion of his name not merely through the social, but to the lowest realms of nature. The spirit is a bone, the *Führer* is a bug? Even more extraordinary because the metaphoricity of insects, bugs, the pest etc., was widely used for the Jews: just as the former have to be exterminated so by analogy one would have to treat the latter, in order to keep order, cleanliness, purity, nation. Does this extend to the beetle that carries the prestigious name as well? In a strange short-circuit it was precisely this unique name that eventually instigated its extermination, but coextensive with its preservation in a kind of mausoleum of collectors' secret worship.

7. Cf. another Shakespeare quote, Hamlet to Ophelia: "Be thou as chaste as ice, as pure as snow, thou shalt not escape calumny." (III, 1)

8. There is a long history of effusions about the irresistible force of slander, calumny, defamation, denigration etc. There is more than a dozen quotes from Shakespeare alone, one can extend it back to the trial of Socrates (his defamation by Aristophanes and others), and if I were to pick out just one instance, then the delightful aria of Don Basilio in Rossini's *Il barbiere di Siviglia* ('La calunnia'), which is like an anthem of calumny, its song of praise.

(Does one need to evoke Agamben? The sovereign in the short-circuit with the *homo sacer*, the short-circuit between the untouchable life and the life that one can kill with impunity; extermination-consecration. And furthermore Kantorowicz, the insect's two bodies?)

I can think of the opening sentence of a short-story: "As Adolf Hitler awoke one morning from uneasy dreams he found himself transformed in his bed into an insect, not a gigantic insect, *das ungeheure Ungeziefer*, but rather into a tiny *Anophthalmus hitleri*. When he lifted his head a little he couldn't even see his domelike brown belly divided into stiff arched segments nor his numerous legs waving helplessly, for he was a blind kind of insect."⁹ If there are budding writers in the audience, I am offering this for free as a cue ready for continuation. One can easily imagine Göring or someone in the role of the chief clerk coming to his bedroom door: "Mein Führer, warum sind Sie nicht am Amt?" Bringing together the *Führer*, the Jew and the insect.

There is something highly telling about this curious intersection between the taxonomy, the very strict discipline of classification of living creatures, with its illustrious lineage back to Linné, and on the other hand the political in the widest sense, the incidence of power and domination, ultimately of the master. Taxonomy is based on a very meticulous comparison of properties, in order to distill the distinctive features, the unique properties that describe only this particular species and distinguish it from any other. To make a larger (Lacanian) claim: properties (qualities, characteristics) are based on comparison, on similarities and dissimilarities, hence ultimately on the imaginary (ultimately the imaginary is based on the axiom *il y a du semblable*, there is the similar, the alike, the resemblance, and hence the dissemblance). I briefly follow Jean-Claude Milner's handy résumé of the logic of the imaginary:

"1. There are properties (qualities); 2. It is they and they alone that distinguish, by differences and resemblances; 3. Two entities not distinguished by any property count as One, and two entities that count for two must have at least one dissimilar property."¹⁰

As opposed to this, the regime of naming is based on the symbolic which is not a matter of distinguishing similar or dissimilar qualities, but rather on a discernment, a distinction not based on properties at all – this is what a signifier ultimately is, an entity produced by difference alone, by pure difference, without any positive terms, as Saussure

9. Cf. Kafka, *The Complete Stories*, New York: Schocken Books 1971, p. 89.

10. Jean-Claude Milner, *Les noms indistincts*, Paris: Seuil 1983, p. 32.

famously insisted.¹¹ Not a difference between any given things or qualities existing prior to the discernment, or as Milner succinctly puts it: “discernment comes first, and this is what founds properties.”¹² So there is an encounter and an overlap of two different kinds of logic: scrutinizing the distinctive features by comparing similar and dissimilar properties, and the logic of naming based on pure distinction, pure difference, ultimately the intervention of S1 as the signifier of pure discernment. Lacan, in a session of his seminar *Crucial problems for psychoanalysis* (1964/65, Seminar XII) devoted in a large part to *Cratylus* and the problem of nomination, insisted on this:

“to preserve the originality of the function of nomination, understand by this where to the highest degree there is maximized this formation proper to the signifier, which is of not being able to be identified with itself, which undoubtedly culminates in the function of nomination.”¹³

Pure differentiability culminates in nomination. The two logics, the imaginary and the symbolic, seemingly support each other, they apparently overlap, they seem to seamlessly cover each other, and yet there is a gap. Maybe this massive signifier ‘Hitler’, an S1 too colossal to be overlooked, can serve as the indicator of this gap and point to something that is always present in naming, although one easily passes over this without noticing, blinded by the overlap: namely, first, names touch upon a real, they are never a mere nomenclature of given realities; second, they are based on the intervention of a master signifier; and third, they produce, induce properties and not merely describe them by handy abbreviations, condensed in names. To quote more Lacan:

“the function of nomination in so far as it introduces into the real this something which denominates, and which it is not enough to resolve [around a fashion of] by sticking to something which is already given, a label which allows it to be recognized.”

As classification goes, the function of nomination doesn’t exhaust itself in pinning down the uniqueness, the specificity, the singularity of the entity named:

11. “*In the language itself, there are only differences.* Even more important than that is the fact that, although in general a difference presupposes positive terms between which the difference holds, in a language there are only differences, *and no positive terms.* [...] the language includes neither ideas nor sounds existing prior to the linguistic system, but only conceptual and phonetic differences arising out of that system.” (Saussure, *Course in general linguistics*, London: Duckworth 1998, p. 118)

12. “Hence two entities can be maximally diverse by their properties and nevertheless count as One in the Symbolic ...” (Milner, p. 33)

13. I am using the Gallagher translation available on-line. For the most quotes are from the session of 7 April 1965.

“What I already advanced here, that the proper name is going to place itself always at the point where precisely the classificatory function ... stumbles, not before a too great particularity, but on the contrary before the tear, the lack, properly speaking, the hole of the subject, and, precisely, to suture it, to mask it, to stick it.”

It is not about properly describing the uniqueness of something, but about suturing, stitching a lack, a gap that pertains to it.¹⁴

Before leaving the bug, let me briefly stop at the signifier ‘bug’ itself. The bug in the first meaning is a small insect of any kind, say a cockroach, a centipede, a beetle; in the second meaning it can be a microorganism causing a disease, invisible but exasperating; in the third meaning it can be a persistent or obsessing fixed idea, a folly – one can be e. g. smitten by a ‘love bug’ or a ‘money bug’, to believe the dictionary; by extension, it can mean ‘an (imaginary) object of terror’, a specter, an empty fear; in the fourth meaning it can be a deficiency, a quirk, a defect, an error in the system, nowadays particularly in computer programs (remember the millennium bug which threatened to disrupt our whole computer-based world, the reality as we know it?)¹⁵; in the fifth meaning it can be a concealed miniature microphone, an unnoticed presence of the eavesdropping Other. To say nothing about ‘bug-eyed monsters’, BEM, creatures populating science fiction; and to say even less about ‘bugger’ etc. If we take all these meanings together, in their interconnected diversity, in their inconsistent multiplicity yet based on a red thread – couldn’t one see in this a good introduction into what Lacan called object a? The tiny thing, almost nothing, the fluke, the malfunction, the fixed idea, the empty fear, the object of terror, the tiny eavesdropping, all of it in a metaphorical condensation. (Can one propose ‘The object is the bug’ as another infinite judgment?) So here we would thus have, at the minimal, the name as a double creature: the reduction to S1, the master signifier, and the object a. I’ll come back to this.

Can names serve as a basis to produce a species? Here I can briefly evoke another parochial case stemming from my country (I apologize

14. Lacan’s great example is Oedipus. “Oedipus, swollen foot, is that self-evident? What is there in the hole between the swelling and the foot? Precisely the pierced foot; and the pierced foot is not said. It is the swollen foot with its enigma which remains open in the middle.”

15. The Millennium Bug threatened to throw our time ‘out of joint’ – as Hamlet appropriately predicted: “Aye, there’s the bug.”

again), the case (now become quite famous) of the three Slovene artists who in 2007 changed their names, and the name they chose was the name of the then Slovene right wing prime minister Janez Janša. They were all three renamed to the same name, that of Janez Janša, and they refused to give any explanation for that act of renaming, claiming that this was done for private reasons. By the way, elections were held in Slovenia last week and Janez Janša, namely the right wing politician (who has moved even further to the right in the meantime, becoming a kind of Geert Wilders figure with all the xenophobic, anti-immigrant populist rhetoric) won the elections and may yet again become a prime minister. One of the highlights of these elections was the fact that in the constituency of Grosuplje Janez Janša the artist (one of the three renamed artists) was running against Janez Janša the politician. Which Janša do you want? (Predictably, in that constituency people massively voted for the politician.) So since 2007 we have another autochthonous species in Slovenia, existing only in this country and nowhere else, the species of Janez Janša, comprising four specimens (actually a dozen more since Janez Janša is quite a common name in Slovenia). As opposed to the natural species, whose distinctive properties have to be accurately described before one can give them a scientific name, a classificatory designation, we have here the case of a species which emerged on the basis of the name alone and hence evoked the specter of a possible class they may belong to. The only property the specimens have in common is the name. And the species was established on the basis of a conscious decision of renaming (not by some people bearing the same name by coincidence). Is this a species or not? A cultural species? A species which takes the name as the sole property for its establishment? Of course names form families, there are family names, not without biological connotations – family in taxonomy is the rank immediately above species and genus (followed by order, class, phylum etc. in progressive generalization). Families are supposed to be based on kinship, hence sharing a common genetic descent, and their signpost is what is in psychoanalysis known as ‘the name of the father’ (the signifier covering genetics, as it were), whereas the new group of Janšas relies on the replication by name alone, S1 divorced from the name of the father (the symbolic order of names again in discrepancy with the order of properties). S1 with no fatherhood, with a spurious lineage claim based on the symbolic replication implying the real involved in the name.

The renaming of the three Janez Janšas caused unease precisely because the three bearers of the new name at no moment wanted to

explain their decision and provide the reason for their name change. (But, ultimately, what would be a sufficient reason for any naming?) They did not substantiate or justify the name change with conversion, the adoption of a new belief, the beginning of new life, as it is commonly done (cf. Cassius Clay changing his name to Muhammad Ali; or Lenin, Tito etc.). And the name they have chosen didn't seem to embody their belief, their political allegiance, or to provide a model of what they wanted to be. Anything but – yet even if we can assume that it perhaps embodies precisely all that they themselves would by no means want to be, no criticism was ever explicitly voiced. Faced with the media probing, the only reasons they kept repeating were 'personal reasons', an intimate personal decision etc., that is, something that functions as a cloak behind which it is impolite to probe, but at the same time as a cliché excuse, since 'personal reasons' are precisely another name for not wanting to reveal the true reason. The lack of justification for the name change, the fact that it was not accompanied by a conversion to some new faith, the cloning of three identical names that precisely excludes individuality and uniqueness and, lastly, the choice of the name that does not borrow from any celebrated and mythical past, but points to the miserable present – all this makes it impossible to make sense of this gesture and its message in any immediate or obvious way. The gesture clearly has a strong message, but it is not quite clear what this message is supposed to be. This is like establishing a parallel symbolic order or network, cloning the present one and thus undermining it. The effect is like producing a Rorschach test, a social blot – what people see in it tells a lot about people seeing it rather than about the three renamed artists. And qualifying them as artists is already misleading, since one thereby self-evidently places their project into the domain of art, where (supposedly) everything is allowed, while the point of the project was rather blurring the line between art, politics and 'real' life. (This were not pseudonyms, assumed artistic names etc., they changed all their documents and their legal status.)

Finally, to say something about Plato's dialogue *Cratylus* which serves as one of the starting points of our gathering. It bears the subtitle "One the correctness of names", and the subtitle is already puzzling: can some names be more correct than other names? Can a truth value be ascribed to a mere name, not to a proposition? At the minimal, the subtitle seems to be anti-Saussurean, aimed against the basic Saussurean tenet about the arbitrariness of signs. 2300 years before Saussure Plato debated the Saussurean question, with Hermogenes

defending at least a basic Saussurean line that names are but a convention, they can be other than they are, and we only respect an arbitrary general agreement, whereas Cratylus maintained that names evoke things named, they must be connected with them, there has to be an umbilical cord pertaining to their etymology and/or sound value. Some are closer to the thing, designating it better than others, and Greek seems to be particularly fortunate in having such formidable apt names.¹⁶ The dialogue gives some 130 fancy, extravagant and preposterous etymologies, seemingly trying to provide evidence that a particular name (both common and personal names), a particular signifier is more apt to designate the particular thing or meaning than another.¹⁷ Is Plato pulling our leg? Why does Socrates, who ultimately doesn't sustain this position, spend so much time and energy with these etymologies, puns, rebuses (so to speak), wordplays, evocative reasoning by sound echoes and chance similarities? For what Socrates ultimately wants is to get to the essence of things by bypassing names altogether:

“it's clear we'll have to look for something other than names, something that will make plain to us without using names which of these names are the true ones. ... But if that's right, Cratylus, then it seems it must be possible to learn about the things that are, independently of names.” (438d-e)

The essence of things is ultimately nameless, and only if we first get hold of it in its immediate clarity we would be in a position to decide about their correctness and truth value. One could call this the ultimate fantasy of logos, the wordless foundation of logos (but logos means ‘the word’, so this would be ‘the wordless word’), getting to the essences without a signifier, a wordless nameless logos as the foundation of naming. If the signifier hinges on pure discernment independent of properties, then the aim of Socrates could be described as a pure discernment of *eidos* without a signifier.

16. What about the barbarians? They are by etymology speechless, deprived of language.

17. Why are gods called gods, ‘*theoi*’? “It seems to me that the first inhabitants of Greece believed only in those gods in which many foreigners still believe today – the sun, moon, earth, stars, and sky. And, seeing that these were always moving or running, they gave them the name ‘*theoi*’, because it was their nature to run (*thein*).” (397b) So we are a bit bemused to learn that ‘gods’ come from ‘running’, on the rather flimsy evidence that the two words happen to sound alike. And why are men called men, ‘*anthrōpoi*’? “The name ‘human’ signifies that the other animals do not investigate or reason about anything they see, nor do they observe anything closely. But a human being, no sooner sees something – that is to say, ‘*opōpe*’ – than he observes it closely and reasons about it. Hence human beings alone among the animals are correctly named ‘*anthrōpos*’ – one who observes closely what he has seen (*anathrōn ha opōpe*).” (399c) Etc.

But why does Socrates not abide by his own teaching, displaying such a fanciful enjoyment in the panoply of punning? It is as if one kind of fantasy, that of the nameless epistemological knowledge of essences, based on the pure gaze of theory (and theory comes from *theorein*), would be counterbalanced by another fantasy, or rather a plague of fantasies (to use Žižek's book title) connected to names. Every name raises a fantasy, the fantasy of its link with the object named, the quasi-natural prolongation of things in names and vice versa. For what this exercise ultimately displays is not the epistemological value of names, but their utter embeddedness in what Lacan called *lalangue*, the erratic nature of language, the erratic flipside of logos. Instead of nameless logos as a foundation, the game of *lalangue*. Lacan points out

“the casualness, ... the way in which in the debate the words are cut up, solicited by the way in which the game is carried out ... this exercise which consists in showing us in everything that refers to this function of nomination, what is important, what he shows us in this game with words, is the way of cutting them up with scissors. ... this property of being a collage.”

So the counterpart to the fantasy of unity and correspondence is actually cutting up words with scissors, slicing them into particles and reassembling them in a collage. Not the seamless relation of (secret) correspondence, but the cut of the signifier and into the signifier.¹⁸ As Lacan indicates, far from being simply naïve, the Cratylan exercise points to the real of language¹⁹ precisely in its homonymy – and there is no unconscious without homonymy. (Could one say that homonymy is the transcendental condition of the unconscious?) All this punning and homonymy seem to be ‘of such stuff that dreams are made of’, i. e. precisely the unconscious. So ultimately *Cratylus* is suspended between two fantasies: the fantasy of an immediate grasp of logos beyond names, and the multiple fantasies that names necessarily evoke. There is the *lalangue* as the flipside of logos, logos running amok, logos turned erratic, its erratic nature covered up by fantasy, in vain attempts to make it good, to find some ground for its sheer contingency.

Curiously, the one who really followed Socrates' advice that one should observe the essence of things in silence was finally Cratylus. To

18. Lacan briefly evokes the Moebius strip, with the signifier and the signified being placed on the same surface, flowing into each other. But the Moebius strip is ultimately based on a cut, its seamless passing from the one side to the opposite side is premised on first cutting the surface and reassembling it.

19. To follow Milner's handy division, *langage* is imaginary (reference, meaning, communication etc.), *la langue* is symbolic, the properly Saussurean object, and *lalangue* is the real of language.

believe Aristotle's account in *Metaphysics*, he "finally did not think it right to say anything but only moved his finger, and criticized Heraclitus for saying that it is impossible to step twice into the same river; for he thought one could not do it even once." (Met. 4, 1010a) So there we have the reduction of philosophy to merely moving a finger in silence, the ultimate gesture beyond the traps of logos and names. But moving a finger – isn't this still language reduced to its minimal function of indication? Indexing, without a meaning? Is this logos beyond names, or rather showing the middle finger to logos?

But coming back to the other side, the *lalangue* and its plague of fantasies: to cut the very long story very short, the point of psychoanalysis would be that we are all Cratylans at heart, nobody is a Saussurean. Which also means that we have an unconscious. And to start with, Saussure himself couldn't quite sustain being a Saussurean. At the same time as he set up the new science of language built solely on the differentiability of the signifier, he was plagued by the obsessive search for anagrams. The moment he looked at any text (he confined himself to some classical Latin texts) the anagrams started swarming, with no way to contain them. This was his own way of experiencing the "shimmering of the signifier", its non-arbitrary nature, its clustering and reverberations. (Famously, Lucretius's great poem *De rerum natura* opens with a proemium, a long invocation of Venus, and Saussure found in it eleven anagrams of Aphrodite, of all things. Like an archetypal Freudian anagram secretly present in every text. Every text 'unconsciously' refers to what else but Venus.)

Let me take a simple example from Freud, among hundreds: in *Totem and taboo* he relates about a patient whose husband bought a gift for her, but she wouldn't touch this gift because it was bought on *Hirschengasse*, on the grounds that Hirsch was the married name of her childhood friend with whom she had fallen out. The friend may now be living in some distant city, but the touch of her mere name pollutes the objects purchased on the street contingently bearing her name.²⁰ Names touch things, names stick, names pollute and contaminate, names inflict, names perpetrate, there is no neutral name, no arbitrary name, no signifier can quite keep distance to what it designates, to the signified, and to other signifiers. There should be a univocity of signification, but there never is.

Plato doesn't make any difference between proper names and common names. For him it's all the same whether we discuss the

20. *The Pelican Freud Library*, vol. 13, pp. 81-82.

provenance and the aptitude of proper names such as Athena, Apollo, Hector, or common names such as truth, man, body, soul, knowledge etc. The problem of the proper foundation of a name is the same. But this is not how this problem has generally been treated in linguistics and the philosophy of language, ancient or modern. To take Bertrand Russell's example: if the name 'dog' refers to a set of properties that define that animal's particular nature, distinguishing it from other animals, thus delimiting the particular essence of the dog, say its 'dogeity', what makes a dog a dog, then the name Fido, referring to this singular dog bearing that name, doesn't define its 'fidoity' – there is no essence to this name, apart from the contingent act of nomination performed by its owner. Nor does the dog Fido share any features with the host of other animals that may carry the same name. But perhaps the whole point is rather that there necessarily is such a thing as 'fidoity'.

I don't want to enter into the long and fascinating discussion which opposed the descriptivist theory of proper names (whose most prominent proponent was Bertrand Russell), claiming that proper names can be reduced to a cluster of descriptions, and on the other hand the harsh critics of such a theory (most prominently Saul Kripke, whose *Naming and Necessity* (1980) is the most notorious book on the subject), claiming that a proper name is ultimately always a 'rigid designator', irreducible to a set of descriptions and properties, based solely on the contingent act of naming rigidly designating its object. Let me take a by-pass. If we take a name like 'Slovene' (to stick to the parochial vein), then it refers to a set of descriptions – geographical, historical, linguistic, demographic etc. – but also to a set of some supposed real or imaginary properties – the Slovenes being diligent, disciplined, hard-working, conscientious, freedom-loving, friendly, god-fearing, proud etc. (or else pompous, arrogant, envious, conceited, self-hating, self-righteous, take your pick). The name 'Slovene' would thus be a shorthand for these descriptions, the function of the name would be nothing else but wrapping them up in a bundle and bringing them together under the same heading. The name is empty in itself, it is just a sack of elements, it refers to nothing by itself outside of these traits. But is this ever the case? It is rather that the empty signifier designates some mysterious property x which is irreducible to any of the traits and comes on top of them as an addition. Hence it is rather that one is prey to an inversion, a structural illusion, that all the properties appear to be but emanations of that enigmatic property x which is designated merely by the name. There is the specter of

‘Sloveneness’ which cannot be quite spelled out by the properties (however long their list) and which is pinned down by the name alone, not any of the positive traits.²¹ ‘Sloveneness’ is ineffable, indefinable, unfathomable, inscrutable, immeasurable, it produces the phantom of indescribable depth just by being a pure effect of the empty gesture of naming. The name, beyond all properties, refers to an *x* as its proper referent, a singular unnamable substance (as opposed to common names which inhabit different degrees of universality and particularity, and are in principle not singular, they can in principle always be described by other common names). It creates an *x*, which is an ineffable being without properties, a nothing which nevertheless appears as something, it never goes up in smoke by reduction to descriptions, it persists in its nothingness and provides the pure stuff of fantasies. ‘We are ever so special’ – this is at the core of every nationalism and also what makes it so difficult to fight. (And also, on the individual level, of every narcissism, *idem*.) All this can be most economically clarified by the Lacanian algebra of S1/S2. S2 stands for the chain of properties, all of which make sense and can be further described, while S1 stands for ‘the signifier without a signified’, a senseless signifier sustained merely by the act of nomination and its contingency. The proper referent of S1 would then be precisely the object ‘*a*’ and its unfathomable being. This is the minimum that we get to with naming: S1 + *a*.

It is thus with every name. No name without a specter. Naming is evoking a phantom, conjuring a ghost. One always names more than a cluster of descriptions, the singular ineffable *x* is there accompanying the use of names. The name always names the unnamable, or rather by naming it always produces the unnamable, something that cannot be captured by mere name. The real of the name is what escapes naming, yet stands at its core. Or rather, the real of a name would thus be twofold, and the two directions are interrelated: there is its irreducible sound value, pun value, rebus value, which points to *lalangue* as the real of language, its erratic nature; and on the other hand there is the counterpart of the name, something-nothing evoked by it, the singular nameless substance it points to, and which can be minimally termed as the object *a*, inscrutable in itself, and for that reason the paramount object of fantasy.

21. I am borrowing this example freely from the only book by Slavoj Žižek devoted largely to Slovenes, *Jezik, ideologija, Slovenci*, Ljubljana: Delavska enotnost 1987.