

A Story of Many Titles

By Mitch Berman

Before everyone came to order there was much milling about & reading aloud of nametags written in a thousand different languages, in Cyrillic & Chinese & Phoenician & in the case of one participant who is apparently a prisoner, numbers. Nobody knew if his name* should be pronounced “Two Eight Two Eight Eight” or “Twenty-Eight Thousand, Two Hundred & Eighty-Eight.”

Minutes from the Conference

To begin with, everyone was angry at the ampersand: it’s one stroke of the pen, some pointed out, one key on the typewriter, & yet is as much trouble to say or write as, for example, “euchrotic,” a word so obscure it doesn’t even exist. In a compromise that made everyone equally unhappy, we agreed to strike the name of the symbol from the language. The symbol itself can still be used, however, & that’s a relief.

We then renewed our ongoing debate about where we are, a matter in which we all share a lively interest. Some say this place is Heaven, others Hell; a third faction claims that the censors got here first & we have found ourselves in Heck.

* Or *her* name; 28,288 is hardly the most masculine of numbers.

We are reasonably certain that this place is not Earth. Here improbable things happen all the time — da Vinci goes cartwheeling about as if locked into one of his own drawings, Rapunzel trades her tresses for a watch fob, Lot disguises himself as a pepper shaker & meets clandestinely with his wife. Here no one seems to die, despite the fact that we are all on the Malthus Diet (formerly known as Spanish Supper), where nobody eats. Here the most unlikely squabblers squabble: Kruschev, Chaplin, Cinderella & Mother Hubbard argue over what should be done with a shoe; Richard III, who finally got his horse, soon changed his mind & wanted his kingdom back, but had to drop his asking price to a principality, then a city, then a hamlet, at which Hamlet himself took great offense, asserting that the word is a verb & not a noun — *to hamlet, hamletting, hamletted*, he keeps chanting, all of which mean, Hamlet believes, to do as he did — & that, in turn, enrages old Oedipus, who says he staked out a preexisting claim on similar territory, & tells anyone who'll listen about his plan to open a theme park called the Oedipus Complex, where one will be able to murder one's father & sleep with one's mother. Here, too, fictional characters are often seen walking around with the subjects of famous paintings (who usually become fictional characters themselves). Mona Lisa, for example, is among us. She doesn't often wear that famous expression, simultaneously smiling & suppressing a smile, except when Huckleberry Finn has her ear. Usually he has it between his teeth. He's grown up a bit since you last saw him.

No, this place is not Earth, but we have no way of knowing where it is relative to other places. We are, after all, here & only here. Ants cannot

describe the position of an anthill in the universe; you can get a real answer only if you ask them about the inner workings of an anthill.

A motion was made & seconded that works of art, even short stories, be allowed to have several titles instead of only one. Block, that obstinate Austrian, blocked the motion on the grounds that human beings are themselves works of art whose titles are their names, and that multiple names would make for unwieldy nametags and telephone directories. The gist of his fulminations was that whether one was named after a characteristic trait — as in Block's case — or whether one's name became a word only after one defined it by example, one must stick to it. *Damn it!* Block exploded in his gusty conclusion, *Verbs & Nouns!* We roundly praised Block, then proposed a resolution to expel him from the conference. The resolution was passed by voice vote, though those in favor shouted while those opposed were helpless to amplify their silence. In any case, we abandoned the resolution when we discovered that the man blocking the door against Block's expulsion was none other than Block himself. We are a nonviolent bunch.

Since Block can't help himself — it is, after all, in his nature to block — our attention returned to the original motion about multiple titles, which was then passed with little debate. Hence:

**Of the Ghost of Vermeer of Delft, Which Can be Used as a
Verb
&
An Inconvenient Provision of Robert's Rules of Order**

Fassbinder was fassbindered into submission by the imitators who came after him, but he merely let out a guffaw & asked if anyone knew where he

could find “a good house of bondage,” whatever that might be. As he made his exit, his pale laughing bearded face glowed in the night, as if rembrandted. Poor Stockhausen, who scarcely needed more trouble, was accused of attempting a filibuster when he was simply reciting the names of the participants at the conference. He finally surrendered the floor to go to the bathroom,* & returned to find that his own name had come under fire, long-winded & nonsensical as it is. Stockhausen was forced to simplify to the shortest available verb or noun, in either case Stock, which made him gloomier than ever. It augurs badly for the stock market.

Most of the best names are already taken: look, for example, at the American detective Matt Murder, whose gentle methods have all but eliminated murder as we used to know it; the squeamish British veterinarian Geoffrey Courage, who lowered standards & enabled many more of us to be courageous than ever were before; the mediocre French philosopher whose one stroke of genius was adopting the name Henri Dialogue; the blissful German simpleton Petr Angst; monosyllabic Sammy Lexicon; & the notorious child molester Harold Please.

Fuck, however, would make an excellent surname, & it’s still available at this writing. Joe Fuck. Maureen Fuck. Joe & Maureen Fuck & their child Duane Fuck. “To fuck” might mean to get root-canal work, or to behave oneself admirably, or to wade through lava in hip-high rubber boots, or

* Under Robert’s Rules of Order, a speaker holds the floor until natural causes force him to relinquish it. Fortunately, Dr. No refused Stockhausen’s urgent request for catheterization. Had the composer better known the good Doctor’s proclivities, he would have asked him to *refuse* the operation, whereupon the Doctor, as is his wont, would have answered No. Caught in a double negative, Dr. No would then have been forced to perform the operation, & no one knows how long Stockhausen might have gone on.

whatever the Fuck Family made it mean by their own example (unless they were very libidinous, in which case the verb would stay the way it is).

In Search of Lost Time

Marcel, who seems to be on a first-name-only basis with everyone — especially himself — recently switched to typewriter (he has a lovely little Smith-Corona), but refuses to learn word processing; *There are limits*, he keeps clucking, *There are limits*, & it must be admitted that he has been refreshingly modern as it is. He tells a story — like all of his stories, this one rattles on interminably — about trying to find a room in which to type in the mansion where he was staying. Marcel claims he refrained from typing out of solicitude for the other residents, who slept during the hours when he was at his creative zenith, & that he became so agitated that he suffered through restless nights during which it took him as many as thirty pages to turn over in bed.*

Chess master Alfred Gossip whispers that Marcel actually demanded a room lined with cork & sealed tight against what he called “airborne contaminants.” According to Gossip, no sooner did Marcel’s hosts obligingly affix corkboard to the walls than their guest complained that the fumes from the glue disturbed his allergies. When the proprietors tried to accommodate him by nailing up corkboard in a second room, Marcel claimed the

* Marcel might simply go back to the old-fashioned, silent method of pen & ink, but the great author adamantly contends that one ought to forget things past. He would write about his “search for lost time,” as he calls it, but has an uneasy feeling someone else might already have done so. In any event, Marcel hasn’t written a word for many years (however one would measure years here). It is to be suspected that what really bothers him — as it does so many of us — is the presence of Block.

hammering had loosed into the air a noxious dust that inflamed his allergies & higher sensibilities. No, insisted Marcel, the corkboard could only be held in place by naked cherubim who would not speak — just flutter silently against the walls — for even the merest sigh would disturb Marcel in his labors. Everyone here is beginning to find the author a little tiresome, & those few who still marcelled their hair have ceased doing so.

“Fragile!”

- or -

Nine Characters in Search of Their Names

Speaking of Gossip, several of his fellow chess masters (a bloc including Najdorf, Falkbeer, Ruy Lopez, Philidor & Pal Benko, but not, of course, Block*) object to the confiscation of their names by certain chess opening variations. The players claim that they only intended to *lend* their names to these openings, but now the openings stubbornly refuse to give them back. Lawsuits seem imminent.**

Marcel’s countryman Voltaire, accustomed to a daily quota of some sixty cups of coffee, can’t find an electrical plug here that fits his espresso machine. For now, he subsists on Folger’s Crystals (he licks them up dry from the palm of his hand) & complains bitterly — despite the results of

* Who restricts himself to tic-tac-toe because the game allows him to block.

** Our judicial proceedings, involving, as they do, artists & intellectuals, are always amusing. When the prosecutor asks, for example, “Where were you on the night of August 26th?”, the defendant might answer, “in my customary state of perplexity.” At which point a juror might bemoan the atrophy of modern man’s awareness of the physical world. If the judge were then to bang his gavel & call for order, some wiseacre in the cheap seats might instigate a discussion on the Judge as Tribal Wise Man in Post-Industrial Society, & the case would then become hopelessly sidetracked.

independent taste tests — that this is the worst of all possible worlds. Voltaire brushes aside suggestions that he simply use an electrical adapter, insisting in his brusque, hyperkinetic manner that the very Volt itself was named after him. Here he forgets the claim of Alessandro Volta, whose pioneering experiments put his name into wall sockets the world over. It is only a matter of time before a new surname is foisted upon Voltaire, but our copyright committee hesitates to do so while he is still in the throes of espresso withdrawal.

Voltaire's plight alarms Pirandello; desperate to invest his own name with meaning, the playwright executed a series of clumsy pirouettes until Dr. Strong, our busy lexicographer, scared the dickens out of him by informing him that alliteration doesn't count. Now Pirandello's checking milk cartons for six shady characters who, he claims, are searching for him.

A man named Glasscock is banging on the door, but certain of the more juvenile members of our convocation persist in their merciless laughter & their taunting cries of "Fragile!"

Everyone is dreading the one inevitable event that will rend the fabric of our little universe: the impending arrival of that long-winded British politician, John Word. Soon words will become sentences, sentences will become paragraphs, & paragraphs will become monographs. How will we get anything done?