

I can call nothing by name if that is not its name. I call a cat a cat, and Rolet a rogue.

—Boileau

A proper name, we could say, is a token without a type. Not transferable and not reusable, it applies only to me. And I am its complete significance. The proper name completes, exhausts itself in an act of reference. Aside from labeling the object that is its bearer, it has no further meaning, and thus no "sense" such as other words have. Those words, like the common nouns *horse* or *house* have definitions: a set of predicates by which we grasp the concept that can be said to be their sense, or meaning. But a proper name has no such definition—only an individual who bears the name and to whom it refers. That is not only common sense, but it is the view that philosophy held until the end of the last century.⁵ But then this traditional no-sense view was attacked first by Frege and then by Russell.⁶ Proper names, Frege argued, must not only have a sense, but in cases where one is naming a nonexistent character (like Santa Claus), they may even have a sense but no referent. Russell went on to enlarge this view by claiming that ordinary proper names are, in fact, disguised definite descriptions and thus we learn how correctly to apply a proper name by recourse to sets of characteristics. (Thus the "sense" of the name Aristotle is supplied by some or all of a set of descriptions, such as: a Greek philosopher; the tutor of Alexander the Great; the author of the *Nicomachean Ethics*. . . .) We could call this the intensional or sense view of the proper name; and it has been variously argued by the later Wittgenstein and by Searle,⁷ to be itself more recently challenged by a causal theory of nominal reference.⁸

In an extraordinary essay Joel Fineman has recently indicated the importance of the philosophical debate on proper names to literary theory and criticism:

The progressive and increasingly dogmatic subordination by philosophy of nominal reference, first to extension, then to expression, then to

5. John Searle writes: "Perhaps the most famous formulation of this no-sense theory of proper names is Mill's statement that proper names have denotation but not connotation. For Mill a common noun like 'horse' has both a connotation and a denotation; it connotes those properties which would be specified in a definition of the word 'horse,' and it denotes all horses. But a proper name only denotes its bearer. See, Searle, 'Proper Names and Descriptions,' *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Paul Edwards, ed., New York, Macmillan, 1967, vol. 6, p. 487.

6. Gottlob Frege, "On Sense and Reference," in *Translations from the Philosophical Writings of Gottlob Frege*, Peter Geach, Max Black, eds., Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1960. This essay was first published in 1892. Bertrand Russell, "Descriptions," in *Readings in the Philosophy of Language*, Jay Rosenberg, Charles Travis, eds., Englewood, Prentice-Hall, 1971. Reprinted from Russell, *Introduction to Mathematical Philosophy*, London, 1919.

7. Thus Wittgenstein in the *Philosophical Investigations*, Para. 40: "When Mr. N. N. dies one says that the bearer of the name dies, not that the meaning dies." See also Para. 79. John Searle, "Proper Names," *Mind*, LXVII (April 1958), 166-173.

8. This literature is anthologized in *Naming, Necessity, and Natural Kinds*, Stephen P. Schwartz, ed., Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1977.