



Semiotic function of toponyms in “Tales of Peculiar” by Ransom Riggs

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Abstract

The research presents one of the important components of the artistic world "Tales of the Peculiar" by R. Riggs - toponyms. Toponyms of different classes (choronyms, insulonyms, oceanonyms, etc.) are present in every fairy tale, but their functions and types differ. Thus, real toponyms (America, Madagascar, Ceylon, etc.) perform primarily a nominative function and are usually iconic signs. This allows the author to create the illusion of pseudo-documentary which is a characteristic feature of postmodern aesthetics and style of Ransom Riggs. Quasi-toponyms are used by the writer as signs-symbols, their conventionality becomes clear only within the sign system of the whole collection. They are expressive and often have a negative evaluative connotation (Swampmuck, Little Disappointment, etc.). In two fairy tales ("Cocobolo" and "The Pigeons of Saint Paul's") toponyms gain a dominant position, having become part of the names. They act here not just as signs-symbols, but perform a plot-forming function and form the basis of the ontology of the writer's artistic world. Decoding of toponyms by means of literary onomastics and semiotics allows understanding better the author's concept of reality and features of the writer's idiosyncrasy.

Keywords: literary onomastics; semiotics; toponyms; symbol; pseudo-documentary; Ransom Riggs

1. Introduction

First of all, it should be noted that in the course of this topic we do not deal with the usual linguistic picture of the world, but with a fantastic interpretation of the latter by the writer who realizes here his own, subjective understanding of being and its meaning. A fairy-tale space is a real οὐ τόπος - "a place that does not exist". The imagination here really knows no bounds. Therefore, the methodology of the research of a fairy-tale text has to be based first of all not so much on general linguistic principles focused on the problem of linguistic expression and interpretation of real life situations, but on the concept of style which is called "literary" in our national philology and which is based on the uniqueness and exclusivity of the artistic world created by the artist. In particular, in the genre of fairy tale toponyms are important not so much in terms of their quantity as in terms of quality, as they form

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actively the virtual space of the text and signify actively the ontological boundaries of the artistic universe. The place of action here, for all its fantasy, is an expressive condensation of the author's concept of reality and man. Toponymy is usually "liberated" from reality here, and it is an important part of the codification of the author's voluntaristic conventionality, without awareness of which the perception of the text and its semiotic dimension will be limited and incomplete. All these problems are usually investigated quite sporadically and without sufficient generalization.

1.1. Literature review

The topicality of our study is also due to the fact that it touches on the prominent aspects of modern philology. First of all, these are the problems of literary onomastics, which today is as one of the debatable aspects of onomastics as such: after all, there are still disputes about the name of this field - literary onomastics, poetic onomastics, literary and artistic onomastics (Fomin, 2009; Skuridina, 2019; Karpenko, 2013, p. 71) and so on. As for the theoretical foundations of literary onomastics and the history of its formation, it is fundamentally outlined in the recent work of the Polish researcher M. Gibka (Gibka, 2019), although she pays attention primarily to the Polish scientific tradition. However, we are more interested not in the history of the formation of this industry, but in how it works in the space of a real literary text.

In a literary work, onyms always act as linguocultures (Vorobev, 1997, p. 39), which contain references to the historical and cultural context, without which it is impossible to decode adequately the work as a whole. This is one of the manifestations of the phenomenon of precedence, which makes the text multi-layered and evokes additional associations in the mind of the recipient. We fully share the view of K. Willems, who reflects on the interdisciplinary nature of onyms: "Proper names are complex signs with specific linguistic, pragmatic, logical, philosophical, semiotic, historical, psychological, social, and juridical properties, and hence represent a vast interdisciplinary field of study" (Willems, 2000, p. 86).

V. Kalinkin uses the term "poetonym" for the onyms used by the author in the text (including toponyms): "A poetonym does not mean real, but existing in the mind of the author and perceived by the reader, the artistic image of a person or objects that contain connotations and serve to express the author's assessment, the realization of the writer's artistic idea" (Kalinkin, 2008, p. 97).

As Y. Karpenko rightly points out, the stylistic potentials of toponyms in a literary text have a three-dimensional projection: toponymic meaning, etymological meaning (with the exposure of the internal form) and sound (Karpenko, 1963). V. Tsyurupa notes that the use of toponyms in a literary text contributes to the spatial perception of fictional reality, is the essence of "literary geography" (Tsyurupa, 2010). To the relevant issues of modern literary onomastics N. Vasilieva refers the observation concerning how the name is introduced by the author into the text, how it "moves" through the text, and, finally, how it is removed from the text" (Vasilieva, 2005). Involvement of onomastic material allows to understand better the author's style of the writer, the peculiarities of the artistic world created by him - because artistic toponymy is one of the brightest components of the writer's idiosyncrasy (Belyatskaya & Pastushenko, 2014). However, for all the significance of such observations, they obviously describe only certain aspects of the situation.

1.2. Research questions

An important scientific task is to study the work of Ransom Riggs – the now popular American writer, author of a number of bestsellers, which, however, so far remains virtually out of the attention of literary critics. Meanwhile, it is R. Riggs who offers the reader a number of modern artistic solutions in the field of toponymy of literary fairy tales, which are interesting material for the

researcher, first of all - in terms of semiotic load of fairy tale toponyms. However, we do not want to say that Riggs deliberately used onyms as signs in the semiotic system giving them additional connotations. We share the view of M. Blansho that the author is paradoxically "separated" from his own work, which remains a mystery to him because he is unable to perceive it "from the side" (Blansho, 2002, p. 14). In this exploration, we focus on the problem of reconstruction of the author's idea of the writer in this sphere, hoping to draw the attention of future researchers to this promising topic for philologists.

The tasks of our research are:

- Election and categorization of toponymic groups used by the author;
- Identification of key artistic connotations of toponyms and their functional potential in the sign system of "Tales of the Peculiar" by R. Riggs;
- Characteristics of the fundamental features of the toponymic space created by the author;
- Analysis of toponyms as representatives of artistic images in the collection and markers of the writer's idiosyncrasy.

2. Method

When choosing a research methodology, such a category as the writer's idiosyncrasy is at the forefront, which is an expression of the concept of reality and man, in which the author's perception of life and its understanding and their expression in the language structure are merged into artistic and aesthetic unity. In particular, cognitive linguistics has made a great contribution to the development of a methodology for studying the idiosyncrasy of the writer. R. Fowler even offers a definition of "mind style" - a language-specific "representation of the picture of the world" of the author and the characters, embodied in the text (Fowler, 1977, p. 103). Therefore, in terms of Linguistics, such problems as the categorization of vital material and its ideological and aesthetic structuring are important. We can speak of the linguistic model of the world as a especially organized conditional chronotope (time-space): this term of M. Bakhtin is very capacious, because in each case the unique cognitive mechanisms which are inherent in this author's individuality act as an object of study. Since today the study of semiotic-probabilistic and phenomenological theoretical and methodological features of the language text is defined as a promising linguistic direction (Shevchenko, 2020), the literary text in this regard is a particularly expressive material, as these features are found outside the generally accepted mental models and presented in expressive exacerbation.

For a deeper understanding of the author's conceptuality, semantic analysis will also be used, which consists of isolating and accentuating semantic relations in the text; in this situation - artistic toponymy as an important component of the semantic core, which determines the content of the text of R. Riggs as a whole. The diachrony of movement of semantic filling of a word, its life in language culture appears convexly here. At the same time, although in linguistics many things are based only on syntactic and semantic reading of the text, and in literary studies the researcher is very attracted by the context of a word, we often ignore the context of the toponym - as one of interest not for semantics but for pragmatics; attention to syntax and context would significantly increase the volume of the article.

When the question is about specific author's linguistic and artistic solutions, the method of textual analysis is used. Although textual analysis has recently shifted its focus more often from a lexicocentric approach to global issues of speech communication, focusing primarily on live oral speech, in our case, on the contrary, the classical verbal - lexicocentric - approach seems to be effective. This is due to the fact that R. Riggs' texts are a fact of refined elite language culture; this is

an authorial-literary, not an oral, folklore-anonymous structure which appears in the vortex of collective speech experience.

3. Results

Toponyms are an important factor in the artistic world of R. Riggs, and, in our opinion, a very effective and important approach would be to consider these toponyms in terms of semiotics in order to understand the poetics of his tales. As it is known, in terms of semiotics, the whole world is a text (R. Barthes) which can be perceived as a sign system that requires decoding.

One of the founders of semiotics - U. Eco sees in such decoding a process of permanent oscillation between "inspired authentic codes" and "own codes" in search of "correct" reading of the work (Eco, 2004, p. 25). This process of searching for codes is infinite, as R. Barthes succinctly said: "the text is infinitely open to infinity" (Barthes, 2008, p. 121). Our attempt to "decode" toponyms within the sign system of R. Riggs' work is only one of the first.

Thus, the aim of our article is to analyze the semiotics of toponyms in "Tales of Peculiar" by Ransom Riggs.

We will start with those fairy tales where toponyms are only mentioned, without playing a plot-forming function. First, let's note the fact that in almost every fairy tale by Riggs there are choronyms, and usually these are the names of real countries. For example, America is repeatedly mentioned, which attracted people from different parts of Europe in search of a better fate ("The Girl Who Could Tame Nightmares", "The Locust", "The Boy Who Could Hold Back the Sea", etc.). Thus, even a laconic mention of a real toponym usually contains additional connotations, contributing to the semiotization of the image, turning it into a sign. Thus, the introduction of the choronym "America" actualizes the myth of the American dream, and these additional associations are recorded by the author. Here is the beginning of the fairy tale "The Locust": "There was once a hard-working immigrant from Norway named Edward who went to America to seek his fortune" (Riggs, 2017, p.119). Thus, the word acquires the features of symbolization, turns into a sign-symbol, transmitted through the toponymic code.

The names of real countries can be not just a fixation of the topos in which events are moving, but serve as a background for the emergence of a broader historical and cultural context. Thus, the first locus mentioned in "The Boy Who Could Hold Back the Sea" is Ireland, and there is an allusion that allows us to establish even a chronological framework: "This was in Ireland during its terrible famine." This can be seen as a hint at the circumstances of 1845-1849, when events known as the Great Famine took place in this country. America (to which Irish farmers flee from starvation), has been mentioned here several times as well as the toponym New York.

The key toponym in "The Woman Who Befriended Ghosts" is Coimbra. The toponym is also real - it is the former first capital of Portugal, famous for one of the oldest universities in Europe, but it gives us little to understand the events in the fairy tale, except that the question is about ancient times and the duration of traditions. Hildi's friend (and later husband) João emphasizes that the house in which he lives has belonged to his family for many generations: "It had been in his family for generations, he explained, and so it had to remain. The house was his burden to bear" (Riggs, 2017, p. 58).

In these fairy tales, toponyms are used as copy-marks that refer us to real objects (although we mentioned that even in the writer's artistic world, they acquire the features of symbolization). This immediately creates an attitude towards pseudo-factographicity - a technique typical of postmodern aesthetics. Due to the introduction of real toponyms into the text, the author allegedly "legitimizes" all other events that are told, i.e. creates an atmosphere of historical authenticity, even documentary

(obviously, pseudo-documentary) - as N. Mankovskaya indicates, "contemporary art seeks not to imitate life, but to be life" (Mankovskaya, 2000).

At the same time, the author involves the reader into a strange game, mixing real and fictional toponyms (again, we can mention the textbook statement about the playful nature of the aesthetics of postmodernism). Pseudo-documentary is also manifested in the introduction to the story of the figure of the fictional editor Millard Nullings, who comments on the writer's text (including onyms). This indistinguishability, the mixing of the real and the imaginary is sometimes openly declared by him. For example, the action of the fairy tale "The Fork-Tongued Princess" takes place in the ancient kingdom of Frankenburg which is probably a reference to the area in Austria Frankenburg am Hausruck. It is an interesting fact that in this story there is a note by Millard Nullings which relates directly to toponyms: "The country names here are fictional, although in some regional versions of the tale they are substituted with real places. In one telling Frankenburg is Spain, in another Galatia is Persia; the story, in any event, remains the same" (Riggs, 2017, p.19). In this case, we fully agree with Millard Nullings, because both Frankenburg and Galatia are simply examples of choronyms that do not imply any implicit meaning or hidden context, but, as we noted above, such precise indications of place create the effect of factuality (pseudo-factuality).

It seems even more interesting to trace the semantics and functions of quasi-toponyms.

So, the action of the fairy tale "The Splendid Cannibals" takes place in the village of Swampmuck. R. Riggs resorts to a technique which is typical for literary onomastics, giving the toponym an eloquent name (Vereshchagin & Kostomarov, 2005). The name is formed from two English words: swamp - means "swamp, bog", muck - manure, humus. There is already a wide range of associative possibilities, which seem to be related only to the features of the terrain. At first glance, it's just a geographical name, a sign-icon to denote an area. Using the language of linguistics, there is an oikonym before us (more specifically, a comonym, as it is a settlement). This is a part of the "literary geography" of "Tales of the Peculiar" - a fictional object, i.e. a quasi-toponym. As we will see in the course of the development of the narration, the semantic structure of this toponym contains emotional, figurative and evaluative components.

We will see now if we really have a sign-copy. We will not go into a detailed retelling of the plot of this tale in which the villagers gradually turn into miserable creatures ready to sacrifice their own bodies and health for what is called the word "consumerism" in today's society. At the beginning of the narration we can see ordinary people who live in swamps, live in poverty, eat poorly, but still they are people. At the end of the story there are creatures who have lost their human form (without arms, legs, some even - nose, eyes and tongue) in order to build a marble palace (bigger than the neighbor's one), to start a ditch filled with wine, an army of servants, that is, to start a luxurious life to make others jealous. It is worth recalling that the word muck has another slang meaning - "disgust", which adds a specific connotation to the previously mentioned occasional toponym. At the end of the tale, the reader understands that this "swamp" is not only a toponymy as a word game, but also a metaphor, a symbolic symbol of the spiritual condition of the inhabitants of this village, whose hearts are really filled with disgust. So, in front of us there is a typical sign-symbol. This fully confirms the opinion of O. Fonyakova that the use of fictional geographical names is often associated with stylistic, expressive goals set by the author (Fonyakova, 1990, p. 83).

In "The First Ymbryne", the author does not tell us exactly where the events take place, but later the main character - the ymbryne (a fantastic creature that is half-female, half-bird) - meets early peculiars of Britain, and you can guess that the action takes place in Britain. The following story features quasi-toponyms - for example, the village of Little Disappointment. It is a toponym whose semantics contains expressive emotionality. There is a tragic story connected with this oikonym: once

the inhabitants of this village found burnt sheep after a storm, but blamed it not on the natural elements, but on the peculiars, whom they decided to expel from their territory: “When the village of Little Disappointment woke one morning to find all their sheep burned to a crisp, did the villagers realize that a lightning storm had killed them? No, they blamed the local peculiar and drove him into the wilderness” (Riggs, 2017, p. 37). Thus, the word “disappointment” acquires double connotations: on the one hand, it has become a disappointment for the villagers, on the other - for the peculiars.

The story of the first ymbryne is the story of her forced travels, because due to her unusual abilities she sooner or later began to arouse suspicion. To reinforce the impression of how eccentric the ymbryne was to others, the author emphasizes that she was expelled not only from Britain (this is understandable), but even from Oddfordshire. Even when the ymbryne finds a true friend, a soulmate of Englebert, it turns out that this is not enough for happiness - because they have to live somewhere.

“Where will we go?” he replied. “They want to chase us out of Oddfordshire!”

“Wontshire. Therefordshire. Peacewickshire. You’d rather die in Oddfordshire than live elsewhere?” (Riggs, 2017, p. 40).

Imbrina names several places they could go: Wontshire, Therefordshire, Peacewickshire. All these astionyms are fictional and formed on the model of the names of English places. So these quasi-toponyms have a symbolic function - to show that somewhere there are places where even such peculiars as Ymeene and Englebert can find peace. They, in fact, have no special way out - because “The normals’ king has ordered Britain cleansed of peculiars from mountains to sea.”

Finally, Ymeene finds a way out, building something like a parallel reality which is inhabited by the peculiars who have now formed a fairly large community. And the savior becomes one of the most honored heroines, a legendary person.

“Ymeene’s tree was a destination for peculiar pilgrims for many years, but its location has long been lost. One of her tan-and-black tail feathers was saved, however, an ancient relic that can still be viewed in the Pantheon of Notables, safely behind glass” (Riggs, 2017, p. 53). As we can see, the author uses two more quasi-names, each of which emphasizes the importance of the role of Ymeene in the history of the peculiar people.

Finally, let us consider two fairy tales in which toponyms play a dominant role, because the whole plot is centered around them. The toponyms themselves are located here in a semantically strong position, being the part of the titles. We will talk about the fairy tales “Cocobolo” and “The Pigeons of Saint Paul’s”.

The fairy tale “Cocobolo” begins with a mention of numerous toponyms: “As a boy, Zheng worshipped his father. This was during the reign of Kublai Khan in ancient China, long before Europe ruled the seas, and his father, Liu Zhi, was a famous ocean explorer. People said there was seawater in his blood. By the time he was forty, he’d achieved more than any mariner before him: he had mapped the whole eastern coast of Africa, made contact with unknown tribes in the heart of New Guinea and Borneo, and staked claim to extensive new territories for the empire. Along the way he had fought pirates and brigands, quelled a mutiny, and twice survived being shipwrecked. A great iron statue of him stood at Tianjin’s harbor, gazing longingly at the sea. The statue was all Zheng had of his father, because the man himself disappeared when Zheng was just ten” (Riggs, 2017, p. 67). Such a beginning immediately creates an atmosphere of travel, search and discovery. Indeed, the plot here revolves around the search for the mythical island of Cocobolo - so the name itself is a toponym (insulonym, because it is the name of the island). This is an island where rubies allegedly grow on trees, and there is liquid gold instead of water in lakes. Since we are talking about numerous trips, it is clear that the text is full of toponyms, and as the search is connected with the island, it is understandable that hydronyms predominate here. The fairy tale mentions: an oceanonym - the Indian Ocean, a pelagonym

- the Arabian Sea, the insulonyms Ceylon, Sumatra, Tinada, Madagascar, etc. The poetics of the artistic space of this tale is based on the binary opposition of water and land - both heroes - father and son - seek to find a balance between being on earth and in the water element. The culmination of the story comes when Zheng is surprised to find out that Cocobolo Island is his missing father Liu Zhi. The author uses here the substitution of anthroponym and toponym – the man has become the island. “It was true: his father was the island, and the island was his father. The caves were his nose and mouth, the earth his skin, the grass his hair. The gold filling the pit Zheng had dug was his blood” (Riggs, 2017, p. 78). The same fate awaits Zheng himself – he is to turn into an island, because this is his nature, which makes no sense to fight. And only when he realized this, it was a relief because he became himself. Born a human being, all his conscious life struggling to preserve his human nature, Zheng still turns into an island, like his father once did. And only after becoming an island, he finds peace.

The story in "The Pigeons of Saint Paul's" takes place in London. The center of events is, as the name implies, St. Paul's Cathedral - therefore, the urbanonym is also mentioned in the title of the tale. In addition to London, the potamonym the Thames is also used as an indispensable attribute of this city. There is also an insulonym here - it is an island located in the middle of the Thames, which Millard Nullings describes as follows: “Known today as Eel Pie Island, it has long been a meeting place for the peculiar. It was a favorite haunt of King Henry VIII, and in the twentieth century, hippies, anarchists, and rock musicians flocked there” (Riggs, 2017, p. 90). As we can see, Riggs again uses the characteristic technique of pseudo-documentary here - he mentions not just real place names, but also historical figures like Henry VIII to emphasize the reality of what is happening. The narration also introduces the Vikings and the Great Fire of London, which actually took place on September 2, 1666, as it was mentioned in the fairy tale. To create the effect of documentary, the real architect of London Cathedral, Christopher Wren, also appears here. The tale is an alternative story of the construction of the famous London highlight - St. Paul's Cathedral. The temple itself becomes a symbol, a symbol of the truce in the long war between humans and pigeons.

“Wren and the pigeons became lifelong friends. For the rest of his life, England’s most esteemed architect never went anywhere without a pigeon close at hand to advise him. Even after he died, the birds went to visit him, now and again, in the land below. To this day, you’ll find the cathedral they built still towering over London, peculiar pigeons keeping watch” (Riggs, 2017, pp.94-95).

4. Conclusions

Thus, the contextual analysis of the poetic specifics of onomastics in "Tales of the Peculiar" allows us to draw the following conclusions.

Toponyms in the artistic world of R. Riggs are an important means of plot formation. In each fairy tale, without exception, the toponymic space is outlined by mentioning at least one toponym (usually more), and there are different categories of toponyms: insulonyms (Ceylon, Cocobolo, Madagascar, etc.), astionyms (Oddfordshire, Wontshire, Therefordshire, etc.), comonyms (Disappointment, Swampmuck, etc.) and so on.

The frequency of use of each toponym attracts attention - most of them (even real geographical toponyms) are used by the author only within one fairy tale.

The real toponyms used by the writer perform primarily a nominative function and create the illusion of pseudo-documentary, which is one of the characteristic features of postmodern aesthetics. In terms of semiotics such toponyms act as signs-icons (though sometimes they are not deprived of features of symbolization, as, for example, the choronym America).

In most fairy tales, the writer mixes toponyms with quasi-toponyms. The latter can act as a kind of hint for the reader, as they often already contain a hint of the pathos of the story and its semantic and conceptual aspect. Quasi-toponyms in "Tales of Peculiar" contain symbolic semantics and act as signs-symbols, which can be correctly decoded only within the sign system of the whole collection. Quasi-toponyms often contain modifiers that give the toponymy a negative evaluative connotation (Swampmuck - in "The Splendid Cannibals", Little Disappointment - in "The First Ymbryne", etc.).

Toponyms play a key role in the fairy tales "Cocobolo" and "The Pigeons of Saint Paul's", where the whole plot is centered around them. In both cases, we are talking about signs-symbols: Cocobolo becomes a symbol of the search for existence, and at the end - the discovery of himself, St. Paul's Cathedral is a symbol of peace and understanding. The symbolic nature of the central images allows the author to create a unique cultural code through textual multidimensionality and the formulation of serious philosophical questions about the meaning of life, the purpose of man, being and non-being, harmony and so on.

With the help of wide use of real and occasional toponyms R. Riggs manages to create a unique world of peculiar people, which, being a typical postmodern simulacrum, looks really authentic.

The address to a wider range of works by Riggs can be promising areas of further research on the study of literary onomastics of Ransom Riggs as well as the study of graphic means of artistic expression to reveal the toponymic code, the use of comparative analysis etc.

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