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Dikran Y. Hadidian



**THE SEMIOTICS OF THE PASSION NARRATIVE  
TOPICS AND FIGURES**

by  
**LOUIS MARIN**



translated  
by  
**Alfred M. Johnson, Jr.**

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*To my father*



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## INTRODUCTION

*"What makes the nobility of a legend, as of a Langue, is in condemning both to make use of only the elements brought before them and in whatever meaning, they reunite them and take from them continually a new meaning."*

--Ferdinand de Saussure

A single problem connects the two essays which we are going to read, but at some different levels and at some different points of the text: that of the place, the function, and the nature of mediation in the narrative logic. If an ordinary narrative--being worth the trouble of being said--presents itself, in one way or another, as the resolution--in a text--of an opposition or an antinomy which is at the same time its outer limit and its origin; if an ordinary narrative, in order to be produced, finds its necessity in the form of a text--in the development of this opposition and thereby, in the search of an intelligibility, whatever may be the plan where that is established; if an ordinary narrative, in order to anchor its "story elements" ["*racontants*"], in a point of origin and connect them by a discursive sequence, refers to the textual establishment of a meaning in an insignificant, and for that very reason, a threatening place; then an ordinary narrative is, in one segment determined by its succession, the use of a mediatory operation which tends to bring together [p. 10] the sides of the opposition to stick together again the elements disjointed by the antinomy, and to reduce the scandalous fracture of the nonsense.

We are given a specific narrative, which has received the archaic name of the Passion of Jesus Christ, and we are examining the opposition which the narrative finds necessary to be told and the mediation by which it overcomes that opposition. In other words, we have considered the narrative as the narrative figure of a dialectic of origin and change. It is a figure which it is a matter of transforming into its "property" in order to find its primary elements and their relationships, and in order to find the successive, necessarily connected operations, and in order to construct a model from it and thereby to progressively encircle the structure. A structure of a

figure which reveals a dialectic, i.e. the beginning of a change, the promise of a transformation, the drawing of an intelligibility to come, in a primary ensemble of stable and articulated relationships, or in a homeostasis<sup>1</sup> without either imbalance or disorder. This was indeed the other\* of the narrative opposition on the epistemological plane. Can a structure of change be spoken of? Thus the narrative which, in its immanence, aimed at the dialectic solution of its original opposition, presented itself as its original opposition in the analytical--interpretive--discourse that we hear made about it. The metadiscourse reflected or represented in its epistemological relation of antinomy where the latter found its negative *raison d'être*, its point of departure proportionally more necessary that it must be transformed and reduced, under the penalty of succumbing to the threat of nonsense.

Thus the notion of mediation in the narrative logic referred to that antinomic origin of the narrative which is indeed "the other of the text"\* by which this logic is developed: or again its referent. Again it is necessary from the beginning, to determine the position of this referent of the text. There is great danger here of falling into the traps of exteriority, as if the referent of the text referred, at first and essentially in their independence and their transcendence, to a bit of the world, to a moment of history, to a piece [*lieu*] of space, and to a subject who is somewhere else and from another time. The referent is indeed what the text speaks about, but it is this to the same extent to which it is spoken by the text. It is not from transcendent existence that the text (re)produces on the mode of the discourse. It is the movement of transcendence of the discourse, that [p. 11] which the discourse brings back when it is produced. It is what the discourse produces when it speaks and communicates. This is indeed the other of the text, the opposite side by which the text is produced, and which it produces for that very reason: indissociable from the *parole* by which it is brought into use--that is to say precisely by which it is shaped or produced--but without which the *parole* would not be uttered. This is a necessary condition for the transitivity of the *parole*, and every communicativity. Let us recall here the definition of "reference" given by E. Benveniste, whose remarkable tautology expresses the indissociability of the referent and discourse: "The sentence is a unit(y)\* of which it is a segment of discourse....But it is a complete unit(y)\*

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\*"other" in the sense of alterity or the "alter ego" in psychological terms.

\**unité* may mean either a unit or a unity.

which carries meaning and reference at the same time: meaning because it is information about signification and reference because it *refers* to a given situation. Those who communicate have precisely this in common, a certain reference of situation without which communication as such does not take place<sup>2</sup>...."

That being said, its otherness is clearly indicated at no better point of the discourse than its "origin" because it is at this "utopian moment" that this twofaced existence is established, at once, of which all reality is only a reciprocal reflection. But this is not a specular and fruitless point, since this reality is the movement and the power of production which is named "discourse". Must not "the original impulse which has compelled men to 'exchange' *paroles* be sought in a representation which is doubled back on itself, resulting from the symbolic function making its first appearance? As soon as an acoustic object is apprehended as offering an immediate value, at the same time for the one who speaks and the one who hears, *it acquires a contradictory nature whose neutralization is only possible by this exchange of complementary values* to which all social life is reduced."<sup>3</sup> Let us not hesitate to project this powerful hypothesis of Lévi-Strauss on the narrative as an instance of discursive communication in order to construct this "second generation semiology", which Benveniste evoked, formed by "the translinguistic analysis of texts...by the elaboration of a meta-semantics constructed on a semantics of enunciation".<sup>4</sup> *The narrative* will then be in its specific logic the neutralizer exchange by the mediatory operation of the original elements of its antinomy.

For that very reason, we understand two elements of the notion of [p. 12] mediation. It is an exchange of signifier elements of the opposition, that is to say, some elements connected by a reciprocal disjunction. But this exchange is not a pure and simple exchange. It isolates the empty space, where the conjunction of contraries will be able to be produced, but at another level, i.e. in another sense. It is the condition of possibility of the dialectic change, the empty introduction as the sheer "zero" of the opposition, an addition in the face of the "complementary values" of the elements of the opposition. It is perhaps by distinguishing the neutral term as a moment of the neutralization of opposites, and the synthetic term as a moment of their conjunction, that we can determine with greater accuracy the meaning of the dialectic mediation and see how the exchange of complementaries is productive of an additional element which replaces them: in short, how it can have excess and synthesis in it; "*coincidentia oppositorum*", and have in this coincidence, something more and else than the opposites. Henceforth the addition far from being

only the necessary condition of the relationship of complementarity which is constitutive of the symbolic mind in action, as it is for Lévi-Strauss,<sup>5</sup> is also, and no less necessarily, the product of the exchange of disjoined complementaries, characteristic of this symbolic act.

Perhaps it will be said that this production is illusory and that the remainder is found in the "exit" of the exchange process is nothing else than the same thing which has permitted it to begin. Every narrative would then be the interplay of this illusion. The opposition which provokes it, far from dissipating it, would only be repeated interminably all along its incidents and episodes. And the "solution" which these caused at the end of the tests, the exiles, and the meetings, by which the signifiers are exchanged in the internal communication of the discourse, would be only the representation of the initial opposition, in a bifurcation which would have the only innovation of the decoy. It is possible; but it is also possible that the neutralizing function of the exchange may be forgotten, in this hypothesis--that it may be inside the discourse or outside between speakers--which annuls the opposites in an instant in the intersection of a gift and a counter-gift but which instead of making them return to the primary unity and the primary indistinctness--those where nothing is done and nothing is said: the obscurity of the thing [p. 13] itself--maintains them in their pure difference and entertains them as different at the end of the process. This operation is not a mystery, nor a magical trick. It only makes apparent the intimate connection\* of "saying" and "doing" in the discourse of the narrative.

If the narrative speaks about something that is the anti-mony of its origin, and if the initial opposition speaks it by causing it, that means that in the process of exchange and communication which constitutes the narrative in all its dimensions of its transmission and reception, and of its coding and expression, a transformation begins and a "travail" of contraries develops. A fixed production of meaning, and an "act of meaning" in and by a "speaking",<sup>6</sup> are disconnected by the surprising threat which constitutes this symbolic thing, which is at the same time full and double, in itself and different than itself, coexisting in itself at a distance from itself, in order to repeat the remark by Lévi-Strauss: vacillation from the thing of the being, violence of a fracture in the thing and in the being which are precisely "the other of the discourse" that they cause and which unceasingly annuls them and reinvests

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\**articulation* may mean either "connection" or "articulation".



them in the empty space of their difference. Such is the function of the reference in the discourse of the narrative. It is at the same time its condition of existence and the material which ceaselessly transforms it into a product; which unceasingly shapes it because this material is not a thing, but a gap in the things. It is not a being, but a difference in the being, a productive disjunction. It is the travail of the discourse of the narrative on this difference that we have tried in turn to recover in a metadiscourse of the Passion narrative; a representation divided in two and in an exchange process, no longer narrative, but meta-narrative, of the narrative of an exchange and a communication.

The problems of mediation and reference are thus fundamentally connected to the narrative logic. Again it was necessary to determine precisely the strategic plan of the analysis and the point on which in fact the weight bears. This point and this plan appeared to us to be the proper name. Why? Because the proper name has the characteristic of being an element of the textual surface, of a "manifestation" which is endowed with very remarkable properties for our purposes. It refers "by definition" to a referent and is depleted in this aim. But for that very reason it indicates a singularity, and it only has a linguistic existence in this [p. 14] indication. In other words, and to repeat Benveniste's terms from the text which we cited above, the proper name would be that sign of language which, in the closed world of signs, would function as a "sentence", by only having access to the meaning by its reference, less in a given situation, than in a singular *existant* which it would cause to occur in the "parole", entirely by referring it to this *other* of the language which cannot be spoken, but only indicated by a kind of verbal gesture. Thus the proper name has in language a single strength and a no less remarkable weakness. If it is at the border of the *parole* and silence, marking the inferior zone of language, it is also the transgression of this border, not at this level, but between *langue* and *parole*, and in the caesura of the symbolic bifurcation since in some way it is the presence in the language of the being itself as such, in its attributed transcendence.

Our first approach has taken aim at the proper place names or the toponyms of the Passion narrative. Their organization inside of the narrative, the relationships which they were able to maintain, in their recurrences or their absences, in their arrangement along the narrative line, permit us then to construct what we have called the productive scene of the narrative, as a network of named textual places. This scene was productive, in so far as the network of places which marks it out and articulates it is a double process of transformation: in the system of the text defined here by four variants in a

position of reciprocal representation (the four canonical gospels) and in the large syntagmatic of the narrative articulated in ensembles, which are at the same time in a hierarchical system and ordinate of segments, sequences, functions, and qualifications. The scene of the narrative, as a network of places in the names which specify them, is thus simultaneously the product of the narrative and the ensemble of textual marks of its production: the traces of the work on this other of the text [*autre-du-texte*] (or its referent) of which the narrative is composed. Or to take an example and set it forth schematically. "Bethany" is the toponymic name of two sequences of relations and correlations, the name of a textual place where a meaning is produced. It is a toponym of the resurrection of Lazarus and the performative mortuary anointing of Jesus. But it is also a toponym of his "messianic" entrance into Jerusalem and his ascension. "Bethany" is the figure of the articulation of his Life and Death and of the [p. 15] contradictory messianic Kingship. This name is the textual mark of the *effeetuation* (or of the mediation) of this double opposition seized then as the other of the text [*autre-du-texte*].

Therefore the proper (place) noun has this ambiguous value, or this transgressive power of indicating the back side of the text as transcendence, but considered as a textual element and as such, capable of entering into a signifier network, that of the places where the meaning is produced. It is this borderline function which Lévi-Strauss has well placed in a prominent position in a series of texts from *The Savage Mind* and of which our own reflections constitute at the same time an extension and an application. Setting aside the logical-philosophical hypothesis of the insignificance of proper names, Lévi-Strauss considers them in the edifice of a specific language, as the edge of the cut [*coupure*] which separates the language of the world from things. More precisely, the proper names would constitute the boundary of a classificatory work in the heart of a specific cultural system, while remaining "always in the direction of the classification". And the author continues: "Consequently in each system the proper names represent some *quanta of signification* underneath which one does nothing more than show." Certainly, the proper name is not reducible to a pure index, nor to a simple demonstrative pronoun as Peirce or Russel were able to conceive of it; for the simple reason that they are names and therefore belong to the language. To be sure, it will never be possible to pass by imperceptible degrees from "showing" to "speaking". And one can say with Lévi-Strauss that "the more or less 'proper' character of names is not determinable in an intrinsic way, nor by their comparison with the other words of language", but that "it depends on the moment at which each society declares its work of classification finished".<sup>7</sup>

But it does not follow at all that the proper name is a boundary of the operative power of a signifier system in a culture, and that some phenomena of interferences and turbulences are always produced on the boundaries which reveal the contact between the system and what could be metaphorically called its environment. In other words, a boundary is not an inert cutting [*coupure*]: there is a frame of the boundary, a place of confrontation of opposing forces, a place where the other of the system [*l'autre-du-système*] points. It is this place that marks the proper name. "It is always in the direction of the classification"; but it is also the end of the [p. 16] classification in a specific culture, the point beyond which one does nothing more than exist in immediate contact with the same thing, even if this contact and this immediacy are pure utopia. Because it would be necessary to ask if "showing" is not already signifying the thing as an object to be studied in common. Therefore already it is not a communication between indicators producing meaning, and hence the transmission of a useful sign, of an information intended to control and orient a force for a task to be accomplished.<sup>8</sup> But that is not the point. Because the proper name is at the boundary of the system, and it sets forth the frontier, it constitutes the place of exchange of the system, the zone where it strives to integrate elements which are "external" to it, and to inflect the forces which threaten its integrity, but also where the first fractures are produced, the first "changes" which will lead to a general transformation of the system, and to its re-structuration: threatened with nonsense and struggle and triumph of sense. To ask what these forces are, and what these "external" elements are is not a relevant question. To accept it would be to lapse into the illusion of exteriority which is attached almost inexorably to every reflection about the referent, to every thought about the boundary. These forces and elements are only interesting to us to the extent to which they appear in their relation to the system as its otherness which produces the boundary in it and which the boundary shapes [*travaille*].

But it is precisely in this epistemological area that we set forth our hypothesis concerning the toponyms in the Passion narrative. If in order to mark it out, it is true that the place name indicates a geographic space, but also simultaneously articulates it in a topic discourse which arises itself from a specific cultural system in the story and in the tradition, that is to say in the last resort, in an ensemble of texts, the following is the problem: What changes the topics, what changes the system--or what remains the same--what restructures it on another level, without changing space and without creating a new world, "a new earth from a new heaven"? Even better, what preserves certain names, and makes them become "different"

without however ceasing to indicate a specific space? In other words, what will mark the *passage*, the transformation of a "cultural" system into another system which is at the same time in continuity with the first and in a state of rupture? How can a topography be preserved, [p. 17] at a time when the topic which is necessarily connected to it must change? Such is the "*Aufhebung*" of this dialectic that our hypothesis inspired us to describe, which referred us to the analysis of the mediatory operation which the Passion narrative also displays on this plane. Moreover is not its "hero" the Mediator par excellence? Therefore what comes to be revealed in the textual structure--understood as a productive space, by its names--the change of system, in the ambiguous sense of this term, preservation and inversion?

It will be seen how the narrative will attempt the *neutralization* of the names in their propriety in order to make them become *different* by their passage to the "common": a diversified *neutralization* since it will take the form of an etymological interpretation or that of a radically new occurrence, or else that of a pure and simple obliteration, into a common noun whose substitution is accomplished, either in a narrative metonymy or in a discursive metaphor. On the other hand, and at the same time, the neutralizer processes will expand through the system of the text, defined by its four variants, and on the different isotopies where the narrative is articulated (narrative, narrative discourse, discourse), and thanks to their remarkable interferences. Then and only then the proper names can make a return to the narrative. It is because the exchange of the proper name has been accomplished as an indicative designation and as a signifier structured in a specific system (contrary to the common noun, which in any case belongs to the deepest zones of the system, and not to that of its boundary) that the change can then occur. At first the change lies in this neutralizing exchange of the nominal signifiers. Not between them, as will be the case in the semiotics of the traitor, but between two lexical zones of different levels: neutralizing exchange, but by this neutralization, an exchange productive of the change restructuring the system on another plane. By it the opposition is annulled in the same interplay of its difference. The same thing is conjoined to another thing because it has been made different by the interference of the other-of-the-system [*autre-du-système*] at its boundary.

In other words, the ancient toponyms can then be born again, but articulated through the narrative in a new topic. These are the same, but they become different because they function in the same topographic indication as a boundary of a new system. If, as R. Jakobson points out, the significa-

tion [p. 18] of a proper name is defined by its return to the code,<sup>9</sup> we are dealing in the specie with a change of code. While saying "Jerusalem" or "Temple" or "Mount of Olives" the new community (new within the old) no longer considers "Jerusalem" or "Temple" as ancient. The Temple or Jerusalem have become different by themselves. Therefore all our analysis is based on the hypothesis of a neutralizing mediation which is the "moment" of the change of code. At that moment the Temple is no longer the Jewish Temple. But it is not only the Temple (of the Christian community). It is the common place which the hero *leaves*, which is then established as a Temple by his discourse. "He spoke of the Temple of his body" (Jn. 2:21). Thus at the "center" of the Passion narrative, there is the interplay of obvious toponyms, in the unit(y) of the same place, a transference of synchronic-diachronic sense, a metaphor. Or to be more precise, since the proper name belongs to the superficial leximatic ensemble of the text, the dialectic of toponyms, between "proper" and "common", with the double moment of the neutral and the mediation, is established as the productive scene of a *metaphoric event* in the system of the text.

We conclude then by referring to the event itself of which the toponymic dialectic was only the representation (*Vorstellung*): metaphoric event or arrival of the mediation itself in the neutralization of the hero by the traitor. It is not a question here of repeating the analyses which will be read in the second part of the work, but only of emphasizing the double appurtenance of the personage and his name on the one hand, and of the name and the narrative event on the other. In general at first the personage is a proper name which appears as an event of reading; but which, at the same time, functions along the narrative line as the figure of an exchange of functions and qualifications, of "logical" classes where they are grouped at narrative places where they articulate the story. Thus what Paul Ricoeur writes of the word in general can be applied more particularly to the proper name of the personage in the narrative enchainment of a text. It is the exchanger between the system and the act, the structure and the event. "On the one hand," Paul Ricoeur continues, "it belongs to the structure as a differential value, but then it is only a semantic virtuality, on the other, it belongs to the act and the event, in so far as its [p. 19] semantic actuality is contemporary with the fading actuality of the [narrative] statement". It is what we call an event of reading in the system of the text. But, he adds, "the word outlives the sentence...at the transitory instant of the discourse....Thus loaded with a new value of use...it returns to the system and by returning to the system, it gives it a history".<sup>10</sup>

One will see in our analyses how we are at the same time close to and far from this remark: close by the epistemological demand which we reveal in the most rigorous structural analysis which has been made of the narrative, by reverting to the level of the narrative itself, in the pure succession of its events. Certainly returning to the story, but in so far as it is a narrated-recited [*racontée-récitée*] story in the system of the text, but it is at no point a return by some illusion of referential exteriority, to a historical transcendent of which the narrative would be the simple duplication. This is why the event of which we are speaking is a reading event, that which appears in the complex relationship of evocation of the meaning between reading and read, that is to say in the relationship of the text. But the distance and the difference that we observe in the presence of the instructions of P. Ricoeur are no doubt due to the dimension of the textual ensembles which we are dealing with, myth, narrative, and discourse, and not only, at a higher level of abstraction, the word, the sentence--because the word is for us the proper name, only vocable, which is able to play at the boundary of the structure and the event because it is only of the boundaries of the whole structure by having the value of an existential index (without being an index properly speaking). We have shown, on the way, the operations of a neutralizer exchange which punctuate the transformation of the system, i.e. its restructuring at another level. Simon becomes Peter because he is a (foundation) stone, Jesus becomes Christ because he is Christ--the anointed one....

But even more precisely, it is, in this narrative, a name in which the neutralizing function of the mediation is catalyzed bit by bit through some duplications and recurrences, some iterations and displacements, in the form of a character who--in the same narrative--will carry out the synchronic-diachronic transference of the meaning. It is he who, in the text itself, "will act out" the metaphor of breaking open the system, thanks to which the narrative is structured, and by being structured triumphs over its originating opposition, over the other [p. 20] where it has found its anchorage and its starting point. One will see that it is the traitor who is the other of the hero--the one by whom the hero can accomplish his mission, which is first to establish a recitable narrative, i.e. to be established in narratable *parole* by the community which, in a characteristic movement of retroaction, will only be such by this *parole* in action: a discourse--narrative "act"--spoken and consumed--by the community which it produces and which produces it from an exchange of this *parole*. Such is the referential event that the proper name of the traitor specifies and metaphorizes inside of the system, in order to break it open, so that it will reproduce.

Two reading notes in order to end:

1. We have moved the relevant notes to the end of the work. They constitute a critical re-reading of the text by the one who has written it, in fact by those who have been in communication with him before publication. Also they can for the most part be read between them as a second text having its relative autonomy in relation to the first which however has produced it. Therefore here is repeated in a commentary what laborously we have tried to explain from the text criticized: that it is a producer of meaning, a meaning which is collected in the second commentary which doubles it, but which by criticizing it, elucidates it, and produces it in its turn. It is in this way that the text engenders in some way the metatext which in turn produces it with its rules and its productive laws.

2. Some appendices will be found at the end of the book dealing with some other more general texts or belonging to another theoretical domain. They were needed not to close the volume, but to open it to an intertextuality, in order to show the infinite task of interpretation in action and to a certain extent to break the circle by which it produces the text which engenders it, by indicating the new plane where it is reconstituted. Moreover, the collective set of works in *Le Récit évangélique* which follows our study, in the perspective of the collection, are equally one of the privileged places of the critical overture which we have, even here, only begun.





First Part

THE PLACES OF THE NARRATIVE



## Chapter One

### PROBLEMATIC AND WORKING HYPOTHESES

While dealing with the analytical description of the toponymy of the Passion narratives, this study pursues a double objective: first, to investigate with this particular case the general problem of proper names which is known to present a very complex problem for semiotic structural theory; and to accede then in this way to one of the possible organizations of the meaning in the Passion narratives. From one objective to another, however, the status of this work changes its nature, since according to the first perspective, it is only one example of one general semiotic problem among other studies of the same kind centered on the same problem,<sup>1</sup> whereas in the second perspective it is a preparatory, and no doubt fundamental, moment of a structural analysis of the Passion narrative, and as such one piece of a structural exegesis of the Gospel. These indications are not superfluous because they can contribute to posing the problem of the relationships between a theory, its fields of application or its validity and the extension and the level of the problems which it is capable of integrating.

### TEXTS AND CORPUS

At the center of the complex interplay of relations which generally defines textual semiology, the question appears of the relation of one text in its individuality and the corpus in which the text is included, and of which it is an element. Depending upon whether the problem presented will be that of the proper name, as a specific problem of textual semiology, then the gospel texts [p. 24] will come into comparison with those of [Sir Thomas] More or Pascal<sup>2</sup> or still others, and the question will then be to make clearer the reasons, other than subjective ones, why these different texts have been chosen as constituting the primary elements of the corpus on which the problem of the proper name will be based. According to the other research intention, the problem of grappling with the toponymy of the Passion narratives in the Gospels will relate to a specific level of structuration of the meaning; in other words, one code of deciphering the texts among other codes. And the ulterior demand of semiological research will be to articulate this code with other codes that the total analysis

of the text will have to reveal and of which semiological research also takes account. It would then be necessary to ask how these codes, of which the texts considered constitute some kinds of citations,<sup>3</sup> enter into coherence and according to what rules and laws they form a system. These two points of view are not independent; but they no longer constitute two different versions of a single theoretical text. Without giving for the moment a rigorous definition of the concept of a level,<sup>4</sup> let us say that these two points of view are connected, despite their heterogeneity of levels, and that one of the theoretical efforts to be promoted will be to show how some levels of the problematic are connected\* [lit. articulated] to one another. We have formulated some propositions for a model of textual analysis on this point in another study: which we should be permitted to refer to.<sup>5</sup>

However, our work will intentionally place the two perspectives in a hierarchy by subordinating the first to the second. This is another way of admitting that the problem of the proper name cannot receive its general solution again and in particular in the framework of this study. However, in order to be able to execute correctly the constituent movement of the problematic of our work,<sup>6</sup> it is appropriate again to set forth very quickly the essential questions which we will pose concerning these texts.

#### THE PROPER NAME INDEX

The first statement of the definition suggested for the proper name in general is, if not an index,<sup>7</sup> at least an intermediary between language and gesture, between "meaning" it and "showing" it. According to [p. 25] this orientation, the proper name would designate an individual and would be at the same time not only devoid of every classificatory value in its usage, but equally of every signification by itself;<sup>8</sup> since entirely by belonging to the language (the articulated phonematic ensemble) it would only be defined by a single extra-linguistic relationship: the one by which it designates that object in the world, and not by the system of relationships that it should maintain with other names. In other words, it is possible to mark a series: "Dupont, Durand, Dunand, Duchamp, etc."; but at first sight, the differences between these vocalable names (of saints), to the extent to which they are proper, are not relevant. They are insignificant. And it can be thought that the singularity of this relationship of naming

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\*See n. bottom p. 4.