

The Importance of Names' Signifiers in Vasco Pratolini's Novels

Giovanni Pietro Vitali

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Abstract

My contribution concerns the use of phonemes, morphemes and other signifiers in Vasco Pratolini's onomastic choices. First of all, I propose two significant examples. The first is taken from a short partisan story called *Paisà, paisano* (1945), in which the main characters are referred to by the initials of their names. The second example regards a brief novel entitled *Cronaca familiare* (1946). In the narration, the characters are referred to by their hospital bed numbers. As for the first example, I would like to suggest that this kind of name conceals a significant meaning. Furthermore, in the novel *Cronache di poveri amanti* (1947) there are four women strongly related to each other. Their names appear in alphabetic order: I will provide an interpretation of this choice. In the novel *Un eroe del nostro tempo* (1949), Pratolini introduces two characters called Alessandro Vergesi and Virginia Aloisi. In this work, I claim that these two couples of anthroponyms are related to the narrative role their corresponding characters play. Besides, I introduce another onomastic peculiarity of Vasco Pratolini: in my opinion, the Italian male diminutive suffix *-ino* has a negative connotation in Pratolini's novels. In conclusion, I would like to show a particular characteristic of the protagonists' anthroponyms, namely that they all begin with the letter **M**. I believe this choice reflects the evolution of the author's ideology in his work.

Further to my analysis of Vasco Pratolini's onomastic style, carried out on the entire work of the author, I have realized that some aspects regarding the use of names connect to one another in different works, which have so far been considered as independent. On this occasion, I will analyze some characters' names which take on a particular meaning through their formal aspect.

First of all, I propose to consider the names beginning with the same letter; this is surely the most interesting case, whose narrative consequences are unexpected. As a matter of fact, I noticed that in a twenty-year narrative cycle, which includes the most significant part of his work, starting from *Il quartiere* up to *Allegoria e derisione*, the initial letter of the names of Pratolini's protagonists is **M**. The use of significant elements combined with the characters' roles is absolutely the most important peculiarity in Pratolini's *nominatio*. The main aspects that link these characters to one another are their working-class social background and adhesion, of a more or less conscious nature, to Marxist political theories. Through the analysis of these characters, one by one, it is possible to better clarify these connections.

These socialist apostles are to all intents and purposes one of the distinctive aspects of Pratolini's fiction, and we find their forefather in *Il quartiere: Giorgio Matteini*. Pratolini takes his first name from one of his fellow members of the G.A.P. (Gruppo d'Azione patriottico [Group of Patriotic Action]), shot in Rome by the Nazis while the author was finishing the novel. In the story *Giorgio* is the ideological model from which the autobiographical protagonist *Valerio* draws inspiration, and he is married to a woman named *Maria*.

The characters of the second novel that I analyzed, *Cronache di poveri amanti*, continue this tendency towards the use of the letter **M**, increasing its occurrences. Suffice it to see the narrative parallelism between the preceding figures of *Giorgio (Matteini)*, *Maria* and *Valerio* and those of some of the protagonists of *Cronache: Corrado (Maciste)*, *Margherita* and *Mario*: as a matter of fact, their role and behaviors in the narration can surely be compared. The most important character is *Corrado*, almost always identified by his pseudonym,

Maciste. This farrier (*maniscalco* in Italian) could be defined as the pre-eminently positive hero of Pratolini's whole work. *Maciste* listens to his heart regardless of everything, and has so much strength and ideological coherence in him that he is able to make his high ideal purer and more human. He is an area manager of the underground Communist party, a man of few words whose gestures are, however, emblematic and sincere. He seems to be the ideal evolution of *Giorgio*, who is likewise described as a political activist, even if not explicitly. *Corrado*'s rectitude manifests itself also in the emotional field: as a matter of fact, the most poignant narrative parts of the *Cronache* are dedicated to his relationship with his wife *Margherita*. This strong woman, although suffering from sterility, is a reference point for the whole Via del Corno, and in particular for the so-called *Angeli Custodi* (*Guardian Angels* of Via del Corno to be discussed later on in this section) Aurora, Bianca, Clara and Milena, who find consolation, protection and friendship in her. The positive couple (their marriage is without doubt comparable to that of *Giorgio* and *Maria*), *Corrado* and *Margherita*, offer accommodation to a young printer named *Mario*, who will be literally adopted by them and will take *Maciste*'s place in the party at the end of his training period. The young man will deeply fall in love with *Milena*, the fourth angel of Via del Corno. Here the signifying morpheme seems to be also the symbol of an ideological handing over from *Maciste* to *Mario* and of the change of elegiac-sentimental perspective from *Margherita* to *Milena*; in particular, among other things, the two women share the same condition of widowhood. Moreover, it is necessary to remember that in Pratolini's poetics the parallelism between love and political passion gives these feelings the same dignity, most of all in the *Cronache*, where they represent the two sides of a coin called humanity.

However, this novel is worth a brief closer examination. *Maciste*, as a matter of fact, is the initiator of this typology of characters (*Giorgio* in *Il quartiere* lives his political engagement in a more reluctant way: for example, he never mentions terms like fascism, communism or socialism) and as such he is the spokesman of an incomparable mythological store. If it were possible to relate the choice of the letter **M** to a criterion of political representation, then the inspirational model of this tendency would be, in my opinion, the theorist of socialism, Karl Marx. If we accept this, the character in question, with the name *Corrado* and the pseudonym *Maciste*, forms with his anthroponym a system of initials where it is possible to isolate the letters **C** and **M** that, with an Italianization typical of the times when Pratolini was writing, can remind us of the initials of the name Carlo Marx. Thus starting from this connection between **C** and **M** in the *Cronache*, it is possible to widen this theory to the following novels too. Hypothesizing that a doctrine derived from this philosopher, likewise other characters derived from *Corrado Maciste*: Marxism originates from Karl Marx as well as *Mario*, *Metello* and all the other protagonists of Pratolini's following prose whose names start with an **M** originate from *Corrado Maciste*.

Continuing with the next novel, without taking into consideration *Un eroe del nostro tempo* and *Le ragazze di Sanfrediano*, two works which serve mainly as a bridge, the reader finds himself faced with *Metello*, the homonymous protagonist of the first book of the trilogy *Una storia italiana*. This character presents some traits which are different from those of his predecessors. As a matter of fact, at the beginning of the novel he has no class consciousness nor a correct emotional dimension with his wife, a strong and resolute woman, whom he gets to the point of betraying (between *Maciste* and *Metello* also passed the cruel Sandrino of *Un eroe del nostro tempo*, with his store of incoherence and cruelty). This Florentine unskilled laborer could be defined as a real character of conquest. From his own experiences he secures a new awareness and a renewed relationship with his wife. He succeeds in redeeming himself after some mistakes that *Maciste*, however, would never have made. Another thing that these characters have in common, again through the letter **M**, is their craft: *Maciste* is a farrier and *Metello* is an unskilled laborer (**m**aniscalco and **m**anovale in Italian).

In the second volume of *Una storia italiana, Lo Scialo*, the perspective of coherence as to the ideal is even more jeopardized: as a matter of fact, the novel represents the social decay caused by fascism; moreover, the protagonists are fascists and bourgeois, while communists are relegated to the role of minor characters. It is in this subordinating perspective that *Marione* is presented: this character embodies the same values that *Maciste* has and *Metello* attains, but he is not able, unlike his predecessors, to transform them into a solving action. Moreover, the name *Marione* can be the caricature of another character already quoted: *Mario*.

Furthermore, it is important to notice the change of nominal perspective from *Maciste* to *Marione*. As a matter of fact, the first is a hero with a resonant name, a cinematographic neologism created by Gabriele D'Annunzio and inspired by the names of biblical heroes like Sansone; Metello, who follows him from a chronological point of view, has instead a name belonging to a huge historic family of Rome. This element could be a sign of continuity with the *Cronache*, since also the name *Mario*, which we find in this novel, is a typical Latin name. This gradual impoverishment of the value assigned to the name's signifier corresponds to the ideological belittlement represented in the narration, thus it is linked to the different typologies of the episodes narrated: for example, a story connected to the underground during the Fascist period will favor the heroic description of the communist group of characters; on the contrary, the description of the period of reconstruction, when some of the Italian Communist Party's contradictions emerge, will make the Communist characters controversial and subject to the same incoherence of the party.

The impoverishment of values is destined to further worsen with the appearance of *Milloschi*, a name that can phonologically suggest something viscid like a shellfish; this character from *La costanza della ragione* is a former fighter and theorist of the partisan war, engaged in trade-union struggles. With him there is a return to the intensity of political passion and fidelity to loved ones, but for the utopist and human dimension of his characters' political front it is a point of no return. As a matter of fact, *Milloschi* suffers from a sort of mental and social dullness that makes him sometimes pleasant and at other times insufferable. This is valid for the reader as well as for the protagonist of the novel: *Bruno*. From a merely phonetic point of view, this name reminds us also of the typical aspects of Russian names; this could be particularly significant since Pratolini, during the period before *La costanza*, strongly criticized Togliatti and the leaders of the Italian Communist Party precisely because of their unconditional support for the Soviet party. As a matter of fact, they supported the military choice of Russia to invade Hungary with its tanks against a popular uprising. Pratolini overtly dissented from this choice, many times remembered in *La costanza*. Therefore, to assign a name with Russian traits to such a controversial character may represent the author's personal separation from the Party. This would thus manifest itself through an anthroponym as dubious and viscid as *Milloschi*.

The appearance of this character represents the final act, in Pratolini's work, of the utopian communist losing his halo.

It almost seems that the initial **M** that, as I suggested, would represent the first letter of Marx's surname, remains in order to prove the Marxist faith in these characters, but it is used for names with less and less authority, thus following a principle of semantic belittlement of the signifier.

Also the protagonist of the following novel, *Allegoria e derisione*, is identified with the letter M: *Valerio Marsili*. He is described as an autobiographical figure, an engaged intellectual in crisis with his positions. This character's peculiarity is that he is evidence of a combination of the letters M and V of the name *Valerio*, which in Pratolini's onomastics always represents the author. *Valerio Marsili* is in fact the last representative of the declining communist ideology represented in the names and personally lived by Pratolini; therefore, his

name returns combined with a surname starting with an M, a sign of the inclusion of the author himself in the series of characters that epitomize the lack of confidence in the party.

Another interesting thing is that in *Allegoria e derisione* the central part of the narration is interrupted by a fable whose protagonists are two little mice with an onomastic peculiarity again connected to the use of the letter M: *Marino* and *Michele*. These two secret agents, belonging to an animal world that has much in common with Italy during the fascist period, seem to remind us of the story of Pratolini himself and his friend Bruno Bécchi after they changed fronts, passing from a revolutionary fascism to support of Marxist theories. Finally, there is another case of correspondence of initial in this novel that even links the name of the protagonist already quoted to that of the co-protagonist: *Valerio Marsili* and *Vieri Mangani*. As happens in the fourth chapter of this last part of *Una storia italiana*, the fable already quoted, both main characters' names begin with an M. As *Marino* and *Michele* represent Pratolini and Bécchi, so *Valerio* and *Vieri* seem to favor the same onomastic interpretation, suggesting a narrative parallelism between the fable and the whole novel.

The last occurrences of the importance of this letter for the Florentine author are to be found in his last work, *Il manello di Natascia*. Here Pratolini writes a very interesting passage that confirms his attention to names beginning with M:

[...] Marino di Moore di Manzù
mi arresto sulle emme come vedi, di Mirko di
Mazzacurati... la mia "testa" che quest'altro
Marino plasmò e poi mi fuse ai miei vent'anni
giace nelle cantine di Valle Giulia [...]

This passage (Pratolini 1985: 151) does not constitute, however, the only example of this peculiar preference for the letter M as the name's *incipit*. As a matter of fact, in the same book Pratolini describes the female protagonist with a long series of names with the same characteristic:

[...] con Cosetta, così l'ho chiamata,
ma il suo nome è Maria, alias
Mira Mirella Mariella Mariolina,
anche Bandolera ovverosia Natascia [...]
(Pratolini 1985: 151)

The long series of *aliases* for Natascia is characterized by the same initial letter. I think this is another example of the fact that Pratolini wants to give an important meaning to this kind of name, almost as if to underline them among all the others.

Concluding this overview about the use of the letter M, I think it is useful to sum up the key figures of Pratolini's work, together with the novel where each of them appears. Obviously, I will list only those identified with the letter M and who have a certain narrative importance. This helps us understand that this factor can be considered a real stylistic mark.

<i>Il quartiere</i> (1944)	<i>Cronache di poveri amanti</i> (1947)	<i>Metello</i> (1955)	<i>Lo scialo</i> (1960)	<i>Allegoria e derisione</i> (1966)	<i>La costanza della Ragione</i> (1963)
<i>Giorgio Matteini Maria Valerio</i>	<i>Maciste, Margherita, Mario, Milena</i>	<i>Metello</i>	<i>Marione</i>	<i>Valerio Marsili Vieri Mangani Marino Michele</i>	<i>Milloschi</i>

What I stated up to now regarding the use of the letter **M** is not the only case regarding the use of initial letters with narrative purposes. As a matter of fact, if we analyze the other novels, it is possible to find other traces of Pratolini's peculiar attention to names. In the novel *Cronache di poveri amanti* we can find a very interesting example concerning the onomastic order of the so-called *Angeli di Via del Corno*, that is to say, the girls thus named by the author himself in the first pages of the book.

These four girls were born and lived together in the same street and take an active role in the narration. It is the plot itself that separates their ways and differentiates their personal growth; but even after their departure from Via del Corno, which takes place more or less at the end of the novel, they continue to be tied together by something exclusive, a sincere love coming from their shared working-class origin. Life and people, however, are often ruthless, and, throughout the novel, there are some moments in which the lack of pity towards these creatures seems to be a real desire to weaken the tenderness that pervades Via del Corno: the Angels will be pushed away, intimidated, outraged deep down, but they will always meet up again and form through different mouths the same smile, maybe more tired but equally simple and sincere.

Aurora Cecchi is the dimmed light Angel, the one that more than anyone else knows the tragedy of life, the corruption of man to which, despite herself, she is forced to yield. One day she gets raped by the elder *Egisto Nesi*, the coalman (il carbonaio, in Italian), and gets pregnant. From that moment on, he maintains her as his mistress at *via dell'Amorino*, giving her a monthly allowance of money for herself and her baby. A short time later, however, *Aurora* and *Otello*, *Nesi's* elder son, fall in love, become lovers and have a baby in turn. When *Egisto* dies, they formalize their union but, when things seem to turn out for the best, *Otello* starts an affair with *Liliana* and rents for her the same apartment that his father used to rent for *Aurora* at *via dell'Amorino*, and even gives this woman the same monthly sum of money. *Aurora* is therefore the victim of both father and son *Nesi*, who both exploit her.

Bianca Quagliotti is the angel of simplicity and broken good feelings. From the beginning of the novel she is involved in a passionate love affair with *Mario* the printer, whom she wishes to marry; but *Mario* starts to lose interest in *Bianca* (she also finds free accommodation for him at *via del Corno*, at *Maciste's* home). *Mario* rather falls in love with *Milena*, destroying *Bianca's* sweet naivety and forcing her to grow up.

Clara Lucatelli is the angel of betrayed trust. She gratuitously puts her faith in people and often gets betrayed: as a matter of fact, her boyfriend cheats on her with a prostitute coming from *Cervia Hotel*, *Elisa*.

Milena Bellini is the angel of redemption, the person, along with *Mario*, who carries out the political and emotional values of the couple *Maciste–Margherita*:

[...] They had different characters to the point that they never got on well. Maybe that was the reason why they were always together.

Aurora Cecchi, daughter of a street cleaner.

Milena Bellini, daughter of a bailiff.

Bianca Quagliotti, daughter of a street candy man.

Clara Lucatelli, daughter of a digger (*sterratore*).

One Sunday morning they were going to Mass, in their Sunday bests and with well-combed hair. The Lady, not yet sick, was at the window and saw them go past. “They look like Guardian Angels” [...]

(Pratolini 1947: 601)

These are the *Angeli di Via del Corno*, whose story occupies the whole length of the novel. The first story to be told is that of *Milena*, described in the period of her marriage, then *Clara*, *Bianca* and lastly *Aurora*. A quick look at the order of their names reveals an almost perfect alphabetical succession. The perfection of the alphabetical order is broken because, together with *Aurora*, *Bianca* and *Clara* (**A**, **B**, **C**) comes *Milena*, whose name starts with an **M**.

In my opinion, this is a very significant narrative choice: considering the distinctive feature of this character, what we said before on names beginning with **M** and also observing that Milena was the only girl, among the four Angels, who was not born in *Via del Corno*, I believe that the initial **M** is the element that separates her from the others and leads to the fulfillment of her narrative destiny, that is to say, departure from *Via del Corno* and from suffering, in a perspective of ideological and affective growth. As a matter of fact, among the four girls, Milena is the only one who makes her dreams come true and lives her love in the light of an intense political passion. *Margherita* steps down in favor of her and she moves from *Via del Corno*. As she had arrived, now she leaves with the man she loves, far from the evils of history and the suffering that *Via del Corno* epitomizes in the novel, to go to France (it is worth noticing that *Mario*'s surname is *Parigi*, like the capital of France where he seeks refuge together with Milena). She is the only Angel who uses her wings and does not get stuck in this Purgatory. Therefore, Milena has some qualities which give her the possibility to break the pattern followed by the other three girls and for this reason doesn't have a name beginning with **D**, which would include her in the Angels' order.

Another interesting element concerning the use of initial letters is shown by the narrative case of *Alessandro Vergesi*, a character from the novel *Un eroe del nostro tempo*, also named by his nickname *Sandrino*. This is a very peculiar example in the work of Pratolini because it shows that his prose and characters can be extremely unpredictable.

Sandrino is a sixteen-year old boy who lost his father when he was six years old. His father was a fascist, and he decides to follow in his footsteps, becoming a *marò* (volunteers who enlisted in the army corps like the Flottiglia [flotilla] X° Mas after September 8th; they were used especially for fighting against partisans) before the events narrated in the novel take place. Next to him the author places *Virginia Aloisi*, the female protagonist, a thirty-three year old widow who ends up in the same building where *Sandrino* lives. The woman's husband was a fascist too and was shot by partisans. From the very beginning of the story they get involved in an ambiguous relationship and become lovers. This relationship includes elements of sadism for *Sandrino*, and quiet passivity for *Virginia*. This relationship becomes dangerous when the boy starts to beat *Virginia* for no reason and even steals money from her in order to fund a gang whose purpose is the re-establishment of the Fascist regime. This spiral of violence reaches its climax with *Sandrino* killing *Virginia* on the last page of the novel.

The two characters, perfectly balanced between the passive and active practice of violence, have names and surnames linked together by their initials and the narrator himself does not hide this, inserting a passage in the story which underlines this peculiarity.

[...] Simulando il proprio proposito con dei richiami materni, Virginia si era data presto una risposta: fare in modo che Sandrino scoprisse ogni giorno di più qualcosa di comune tra la propria vita e la sua.

«In comune» egli aveva detto ridendo «abbiamo le iniziali: Alessandro Vergesi e Virginia Aloisi. Basta rovesciarle» [...] (Pratolini 1949: 1044)

This passage justifies the idea that it is possible to apply a criterion of opposite reciprocity to the two protagonists' initials: **A** and **V**. We will see the reason why the two letters are opposite in the name and the surname. Pratolini must have paid attention to the naming of these characters by these initials since, besides the fact that he mentions it in the book, *Alessandro* and *Virginia* are outdated names, that the author has never used before. The most convincing hypothesis is that these two letters exemplify the narrative power relationships between the two characters, which will lead *Alessandro* to be first the torturer and then the assassin of *Virginia*, that is, his designated victim (it is interesting to notice that *Virginia* is the same age as Christ when crucified). Obviously, the initials' upsetting is quite interesting if we consider *Aloisi*'s obsession, a real nagging thought for *Vergesi*, who becomes her victim. This obsession for the boy is one of the woman's distinctive traits which characterizes her so much that she accepts the exasperated boy's harassment. His despair reaches its climax in the final scene: *Sandrino*, who felt freed from *Virginia* by then, will see her turn up unexpectedly announcing a hypothetical pregnancy. After the break-up with the widow, the boy had found pure love in *Elena Mondei*, whom he did not want to renounce. The return of his obsession, with the perspective of a child who would twice bind him to her in an oppressing relationship, makes him lose his mind: in a fit of madness he kills her. We are facing a very important onomastic choice, tightly linked to the diegetic plan: the anthroponyms are characterizing representations of the protagonists and not mere elements of the narration. The two protagonists' names also become emblematic for the whole novel, the symbol of the events narrated and lived by the characters themselves.

Another peculiarity in Pratolini's onomastics, of which the short stories *Diario di Villarosa* and *Paisà paisano* are evidence, is the use of pointed names to define the characters that take part in the narration. The first, *Diario di Villarosa*, tells how life is in sanatoriums; here the pointed names are given to the patients of Villarosa, where the story is set. In the *Diario* we find these name abbreviations: *All.*, *B.*, *Bart.*, *Br.*, *C.*, *Cel.*, *F.*, *Mat.* Some of them epitomize the shared condition of these characters: sickness. They could hide acronyms derived from names or surnames of people that Pratolini met in the sanatorium, but also the name of the disease, for which they were interned, cure or medicine taken.

Something partly similar happens in *Paisà paisano*, whose characters are Pratolini's fellow partisans named **A.**, **B.**, **G.**, and **P.** By appropriately reading these abbreviated names as letters of an acronym, the result may be B.G.A.P., that is, Brigata Gruppo d'Azione Patriottica (Brigade Group of Patriotic Action), acronym of the underground organization of which Pratolini was a member during the days of liberation of Rome narrated in this short story. Obviously, they can also be just names that Pratolini does not want to quote in full; however, the Florentine author's memories regarding Rome's underground are usually extremely precise, so he may have substituted the letters composing the acronym of his partisan organization for some anthroponyms that he either did not remember or want to quote.

In conclusion, I think that Pratolini pays particular attention to the naming of his characters. This is justified also by many authorial remarks, both in his works and various interviews. The onomastic intention behind his texts is that the narrative relationships themselves, even among the protagonists of different novels, must be represented also through the anthroponym's formal plan, so that the reader can understand, even in a non-completely conscious way, the relationships among these characters. The signifying connections within the name are a sort of mask of meaning which let the reader recognize at

once a character and his narrative role within a complex plot, often full of other figures that could otherwise dazzle him.

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Giovanni Pietro Vitali
 University for Foreigners of Perugia
giovvi@gmail.com