THE TOPONYMY OF ABSENCE

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Abstract: *The Toponymy of Absence.* Absence has a presence in toponymy, just as it does in life. This paper explores the notion of absence in relation to toponymic meaning, namelessness, cartography, the mind, memory and geographical features. When toponymic life is totally absent, all that remains is a set of geographical coordinates.

Rezumat: *Toponimia absenţei.* Absenţa este prezentă în toponimie, aşa cum este prezentă şi în viaţă. Lucrarea de faţă analizează conceptul de absenţă în legătură cu sensul toponimic, cu lipsa numelor, cu cartografia memoria umană şi cu caracteristicile geografice. Când viaţa toponimică este absentă total, tot ceea ce rămâne este doar un set de coordonate geografice.

Key words: *toponymy, absence, namelessness, the mind, memory.*
Cuvinte cheie: *toponimie, absenţă, lipsa numelor, gândire, memorie*

1. INTRODUCTION

Absence is the opposite of presence, we are told. And yet, as an apparent paradox, absence has its own presence. Indeed "absence [is] as much of an occurrence in real life as presence…absences are everywhere" (BILLE et al 2010: p10). Absence is real; it can be felt, strongly and in several ways. It may be temporary, such as when a pupil is missing one day from the school register, or it may be permanent, amounting to non-existence. And

absence can even be felt with a measure of relief, in the sweet realisation that some feared catastrophe has not materialised. It can be an aching presence in the heart for something or someone lost, and it can be a longing for something that has never been known, held or possessed at all. Is one of these longings preferable to the other? We know where the English poet Alfred Tennyson stands on this, for he famously wrote that:

> 'Tis better to have loved and lost
> Than never to have loved at all.

Certainly absence is a frequent and enduring presence in toponymy, where – as we shall now see – it manifests itself in several guises.

2. A SENSE OF ABSENCE

There are geographical names which intrinsically evoke a sense of absence. Some 40 kilometres south of the city of Bulawayo, in Zimbabwe, lies a farmstead with a simple, straightforward name: Absent (GEONET). Who can say what lies behind such a name? Perhaps the name-giver lamented a lack of nutrients in the soil, or the absence of a loved one from the home. A name may be suggestive of absence by virtue of its meaning; a mountain in Mwenezi district, also in Zimbabwe but in the south-east of that country, is called Shayamavhudzi, which literally means "lack of hairs", for this one mountain, uniquely among its neighbours, is devoid of trees (CHABATA 2012: p50). Other names evoke an absence of all comforts; we may care to contemplate the sheer bleak emptiness conjured up by the name Desolation Island, given in 1820 to a small piece of land close to Livingston Island in Antarctica "because of its barren, inhospitable appearance" (SCARGAZ). And in the marshy steppe-lands of northern Tomsk district in Russia lies a small group of lakes named Zabroshennyye Ozëra [Заброшенные озёра], which translates as "Desolate Lakes" (GEONET). Or a sense of absence might be registered in the name of some feature hidden from view or difficult to locate, as indicated by the pair of names Lost Valley and Hidden Lake, found side-by-side on James Ross Island in Antarctica (SCARGAZ).

A lack of sound is another absence which may be suggested by a toponym. Among the islands that make up the Novaya Zemlya archipelago, in the Arctic Ocean off Russia's northern coast, is a promontory named Mys Bezmolviya [мыс Безмолвия] – "Cape of Silence" (GEONET). We can also find Silent Hill in Queensland; Silent Hills in Canada's Northwest Territories; Cerro Silencio in Peru (GEONET). There is a Silent Pool near Victoria Falls on the Zambezi river; an Isla de Silencio in the braids of the Magdalena river in central Colombia; a plain named simply Silencio on the Bolivian Altiplano some 120 kilometres south-east of La Paz (GEONET). As with the Zimbabwean farm named Absent, we cannot discern from the toponym the reasoning behind the name, or indeed the appropriateness of the name. Certainly, the landscape at Mys Bezmolviya is likely to be devoid of human sound, and will surely convey that emptiness of space and time so characteristic of the Russian north, yet perhaps on occasion the silence is abruptly shattered by the seasonal cracking of sea-ice. And can Silent Pool really be well named, so close to the Smoke that Thunders? Yet we should probably not doubt that each feature was named

for a good reason, perhaps for different types of silence – here to evoke the silence of misery and despair; there to celebrate the silence of mystery and wonderment.

Other toponyms evoke a sense of absence by association. One obvious such example is Siberia, a name which for centuries has been associated with banishment. In the Russian language, the word for Siberia – Sibir' [Сибирь] "is pure onomatopoeia. A shiver begins with the first letter and concludes with the palatalized *r* at the end, which, combined with the *bi* preceding it, amounts to *brrr*" (FRAZIER 2010: p26). To have been exiled to Siberia was to suffer the imposition of a chilling sentence of absence – from social, cultural and political life, and from almost all normal human association.

3. NAMELESSNESS

A customary rule of toponymy is that we name those features that we need to name, a practice which inevitably leaves many features on our planet lacking a label altogether. Yet it has proved possible to make a virtue out of the concept of namelessness and turn the absence of a name into a genuine toponym. One of the very highest peaks of the Mont Pelvoux massif in the French Alps is shown on official French mapping as Pic Sans Nom – "Peak Without Name"[1]. This peak is a full 3914 metres in height and is only just shy of the highest point of the Pelvoux, yet it exists with this undistinguished and seemingly unimaginative label. The early explorers of the region found this to be a geomorphologically complex area that was little understood at the time; they were initially unsure of their bearings and uncertain as to any accurate identification of individual peaks. So the label "Pic Sans Nom" was originally applied to this particular peak as a type of non-toponymic indicator, rather than a true name, but it was already beginning to appear as a specific name in Alpine literature by the mid-nineteenth century, as this extract from the climber A W Moore's report of a June 1864 expedition shows (MOORE 1939: 83):

> On the right bank of the Glacier Noir towered the dark crags of the
> Pelvoux, Pic Sans Nom, and Ailefroide, a most glorious sight, presenting
> a combination of perhaps the finest rock-forms in the Alps.

Possibly Moore and others imagined at the time that Pic Sans Nom was a "quasi-name" of only temporary duration, but having appeared in literature it has subsequently stood the test of time through into the twenty-first century, with the name forming its own identity out of apparent anonymity. Similarly, and also in the Alps, there is an Italian peak still today named Punta Innominata (Nameless Peak), with a height of 3730 metres, lying slightly south-east of the summit of Mont Blanc[2].

Russia is perhaps the country best endowed with "Nameless" labels, possessing some two hundred such features introduced by the Russian-language word element *bezymyan-* (lit: "without name"). Prominent among these is Vulkan Bezymyannyy [вулкан

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[1] *Massif des Écrins: Meije-Pelvoux*; Carte Touristique 1:25,000, sheet 241; Institut Géographique National, 1979: approximate position 4453N 0623E (not in GEONET).
[2] Approximate position 4549N 0652E (not in GEONET).

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Безымянный] (Nameless Volcano), a conspicuous peak in Kamchatka which reaches a height of 3085 metres (GEONET). There are also many other physical features with "Nameless" as their label, including several small streams and also examples of Gora Bezymyannaya [гора Безымянная] (Nameless Mountain), Mys Bezymyannaya [мыс Безымяанная] (Nameless Cape), Ostrov Bezymyannyy [остров Безымянный] (Nameless Island), Ozero Bezymyannoye [озеро Безымянное] (Nameless Lake), Boloto Bezymyannoye [болото Безымянное] (Nameless Marsh) and Guba Bezymyannaya [губа Безымянная] (Nameless Gulf). There is a Bukhta Bezymyannaya [бухта Безымянная] (Nameless Bay) on the eastern shores of Lake Baikal (GEONET). There is also a dramatically named Vulkan Nemo [вулкан Немо] in the northern Kuril Islands (GEONET). Of particular interest, perhaps, is the existence of some twenty or so populated places with the "Nameless" label too, and – unlike the physical features, which are for the most part located in the northern and eastern extremities of Russia – these settlements are frequently in relatively accessible parts of the country, such as the villages carrying the name Bezymyannoye [Безымянное] in Saratov district and Krasnodar territory (GEONET). It is interesting enough that physical features which have existed since before human civilisation should begin their named life with a "Nameless" label, but it seems particularly noteworthy that any human settlements should do so too, and still retain such a label right through to these days of global connectivity, in which the search for individual toponymic identity is normally so strong.

Mountain features with the "Nameless" label are also found in Latin America, endowed with the Spanish name Cerro Sin Nombre (Mount Nameless). Several of these features are located on the border between Chile and Argentina; others are entirely within Chile. Cuba contains about twenty unspecified localities with the name Sin Nombre (Nameless). And other such examples can be found scattered around the globe: No Name Creek, flowing westward from the Drummond Range in Queensland; Lake Nameless, in northern Tasmania; No Name Island, an islet in Bermuda's Great Sound; Ravine Sans-Nom in Guadeloupe; Noname Cay, a small island in the north-eastern Bahamas; Nameless Point on the island of South Georgia (GEONET).

For many of us, our personal experiences of landscape – especially perhaps the landscape of our childhood – have furnished us with a mental list of places which may genuinely have no name at all except for those with which we endowed them in our own minds. Despite their lack of a name in the generally accepted sense of the word, these places are important to us, in a way that we may be unable to explain to others. The travel writer Robert Macfarlane has written about such places (MACFARLANE 2007: p237):

> It seemed to me that these nameless places might in fact be more important than the grander wild lands that for so many years had gripped my imagination. Taken together, the little places would make a map that could never be drawn by anyone, but which nevertheless existed in the experience of countless people.

4. ABBREVIATED FORMS

There may be simple absences of words or letters from a name. The resulting truncated forms may enjoy official or quasi-official status, such as Hull for Kingston upon

Hull in England and Bo'ness for Borrowstounness in Scotland, or they may be colloquial, such as the commonly used "L.A." for Los Angeles in California. Such absences are routine and convey nothing except a desire for convenient abbreviation.

However, sometimes the absence of a word carries substantial significance, and alters the perception of the toponym. The full post-1989 state title of Hungary – Republic of Hungary [Magyar Köztársaság] – was dispensed with in the present Constitution (known as the Fundamental Law) that came into being in January 2012 (Gov.Hu 2015). Nowadays, under this Constitution, the simple toponym Hungary [Magyarország] *tout court* is used instead, even in official and legal contexts. This alteration, seemingly innocuous to many observers outside central and eastern Europe, formed part of wider constitutional changes that now define Hungary in ethnic terms and render ambiguous the intended legislative writ of the authorities in Budapest. Whereas the term "Republic of Hungary" could only have meant the country within its existing borders, given that there has never in history been another polity with that exact title, the use of a vague "Hungary" as a state title reopens the possibility that the intended area of application for the name includes those adjacent territories lost after the end of the First World War. This small textual alteration – the absence of the word "Republic" – has predictably caused a degree of consternation among Hungary's neighbours (see for example COE 2013: p13).

5. ABSENCE FROM THE MAP

Toponymic absences are not solely a function of the name. There are also absences from the map – a named place exists, but the cartography does not depict it. And this is not always for innocent reasons of scale. Nationalism plays its part; it may be in the interests of a government to pretend that a particular name – such as an exonym – for a certain feature does not exist. To the east of the Iron Curtain during the period of the Cold War, official cartography (and there was no other kind) wiped its maps and atlases clean of central and eastern European history (WOODMAN 2007: p9):

> For almost half a century, in the eastern portion of a politically bi-polar Europe, the cartographic application of exonyms was censored in order to erase memories of the past. To the authorities in those countries, the post-1945 era represented the best of all possible political worlds. Any reminder of former times, as might be occasioned by the portrayal of (for example) German exonyms in Poland or of Polish exonyms in the USSR, was to be avoided. All exonyms were considered the product of an infamous past; of colonialism, *Lebensraum*, and the like. And the artificial division of Europe during the Cold War made it all too easy for those outside Central Europe to lose sight of what the French historian Fernand Braudel has famously called the *longue durée* of historical perspective. Outsiders mostly did not realise that exonyms had been suppressed rather than eliminated during a period when, as the Czech writer Milan Kundera aptly noted, Central Europe had quite simply been politically kidnapped.

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It is not only history that can be effaced in this manner; the present is also susceptible to erasure. The literary reviewer Neve Gordon has this to say about Bedouin villages in the Negev Desert in Israel (GORDON 2012: p31):

> At least seventy thousand Bedouin in the Negev live in villages currently classed as 'unrecognised' by the Israeli government. This means that it's forbidden to connect the houses to the electricity grid or the water and sewage systems. Construction regulations are harshly enforced, and last year [2011] about a thousand Bedouin homes and animal pens – usually referred to by the government only as 'structures' – were demolished. There are no paved roads, and signposts to the villages from main roads are removed. The villages aren't shown on maps. As a matter of official geography, the places lived in by these citizens of Israel do not exist, and Israel now plans to demolish most of the villages and move at least thirty thousand inhabitants to townships.

Such places are hidden; not necessarily from sight, for they or their bulldozed remains are evident to the passer-by, but rather from disclosure to the outside world. The social geographer Alastair Bonnett has more recently looked at one of these Negev villages in greater detail (BONNETT 2014: pp103-04):

> There are no road signs to the village and it doesn't appear on any maps but, like the forty other 'unrecognised' Bedouin villages in the Negev Desert, Twayil Abu Jarwal grips onto this bone-dry landscape stubbornly. It has been demolished by the Israelis … between twenty-five and fifty times. … [a] local director of the Israel Land Authority explained the ceaseless round of demolition by simply stating 'this is not a village…[i]t doesn't exist on any map'.

The skewed logic of the Land Authority's explanation is extraordinary. Because the village is not on the map, it therefore cannot exist. So if it does in fact exist, it must be destroyed, because it is not on the map. That which is absent from the map cannot be allowed to exist in reality. Hence the cartographer becomes the arbiter of existence. And the intent to avoid the disclosure of such villages to the outside world is really rather successful, given that it is well-nigh impossible to find any definitive sources for the precise location of this particular village (which seems to be near Laqiyya, north-east of the town of Beersheba) or the correct spelling of the village name (which in romanized form is probably Ṭuwayyil Abū Jarwal)[3].

Also present in reality but absent from the map and register were the closed settlements of the Soviet Union (see for example ROWLAND 1996). These settlements, of which there were at least sixty ranging in population size from 2000 to well over 100,000 inhabitants, were engaged in industrial or military activities that the authorities preferred not to publicise. They were officially designated as "populated places located in closed

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[3] Wikimapia (http://wikimapia.org) shows an unnamed "Bedouin Settlement" at 3118N 3448E which may be this particular village.

administrative-territorial formations", with the Russian-language acronym ZATO[4]. They were routinely absent from all cartography, and reference to them was made by means of a post-code numeral attached to the name of a well-known open settlement located relatively nearby. Thus, for example, the closed settlements of Seversk [Северск] and Zheleznogorsk [Железногорск] – each with a population in excess of 100,000 – were never referred to by those names but were known instead as Tomsk-7 and Krasnoyarsk-26 respectively. In reality, Seversk is a settlement 15 kilometres from Tomsk, while the distance between Zheleznogorsk and the city of Krasnoyarsk is some 50 kilometres (GEONET).

6. ABSENCE FROM THE MIND

We have seen how the concept of absence can be reflected in a geographical name, and we have seen how absences can be reflected on maps. But there may also be absences from the mind. Unfamiliar landscapes cause us to miss crucial toponyms, which are present but of which we are unaware because, as outsiders, we do not recognise those features which are relevant on the ground. We may for example look out at a landscape and simply see a uniform desert, whereas in fact (WOODMAN 2014: p137):

> in reality one area around which we are standing is good going for camels, another area around us is by contrast exceptionally heavy going, and yet another area nearby is renowned for bursting into floral bloom after the occasional rains. These localities, each invisible to us as outsiders, are the features that carry the geographical names because they are the features to which local people need to attribute an identity.

If we travel on an unfamiliar road in a foreign country we leave one village sign behind and several kilometres later we see a new village sign, but that does not mean an absence of toponyms in between; they may well exist without our being aware of them. And these intermediate places may be of crucial significance, too. In writing about his extraordinary walk across the width of Afghanistan in 2002, the British diplomat, historian and politician Rory Stewart chose to focus on such interstitial locales – which he refers to as "the places in between" – for the title of his book (STEWART 2004: p213):

> [E]veryone had memorized a chant of names and villages along footpaths in every direction. This was a very useful map. It specified everything in terms of a man on foot. … I recited and followed this song-of-the-places-in-between as a map.

These in-between places really matter in our lives, yet can remain frustratingly absent from the record. Simple biographies or obituaries focus on a person's place of birth and death, and in doing so the places that really mattered in that person's life may not appear. In

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[4] ЗАТО: населённые пункты, расположенные в закрытых административно-территориальных образованиях (ZATO: naselënnyye punkty, raspolozhennyye v zakrytykh administrativno-territorial'nykh obrazovaniyakh).

writing about the English poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge, the literary reviewer Richard Holmes noted that essential to an understanding of the poet's life were (HOLMES 2014: 61):

> Not just the birthplace, or the blue-plaque place, but the temporary places, the passing places, the lost places, the dream places.

Yet, such places are sadly so often absent from the picture that we find portrayed.

7. ABSENCE AND MEMORY

Beyond a point it becomes difficult to talk about absence without also invoking memory. Returning to Tennyson's lines, if the truth is that we have never loved – or for that matter disliked – at all, then indeed there is no past occasion to provide us with a memory. Absence here means non-existence, as with the absence of sound at Mys Bezmolviya. But if on the other hand we have indeed truly loved and lost – or disliked and lost – then there is in fact a memory of that lost occasion which, for better or worse, will be stored away in our mind. This feeling of absence may be precipitated by such triggers as homesickness, longing, nostalgia or melancholia. Those personally familiar with Pripyat (near Chernobyl), Fukushima (Japan), Pyramiden (Spitsbergen), Ağdam (Azerbaijan) or Varosha (Cyprus) before these locations were abandoned will subsequently have had their own powerful memories of the absences which followed.

In the late 1970s, the mining of asbestos in and around the western Australian town of Wittenoom was recognised as an insurmountable and potentially lethal hazard for the population, all of whom were as a consequence obliged to leave by 2007, at which point (GOV.AU 2007):

> [T]he Government of Western Australia removed the town's official status and shut off the power grid. In June 2007 the townsite was officially degazetted and the town's name was removed from official maps and road signs.

In England, the deletion of the county name Middlesex from official parlance, and its consequent absence from the current lexicon of English counties, has done nothing at all to banish that name and its accompanying identity from the minds of those who live there.

The Dutch writer Cees Nooteboom has remarked how Berlin in particular is a city of absences, suffused by its past, where vanished monuments and bunkers – and of course the Wall and its death strip – all contrive to speak of nothingness, of emptiness, and of destruction. As for the former Nazi party rally site in Nuremberg, he remarks that "[n]othing remains but the place itself, intended to demonstrate absence" (NOOTEBOOM 2012: p168). In Nuremberg, then, absence can be felt with a particularly brooding presence.

8. ABSENCE OF FEATURES

Society may cling on to a toponymic past which is no longer reflected in present-day reality. In 1981, the Canadian writer and broadcaster Chris Brookes visited Nicaragua

and spent some time endeavouring to negotiate his way around that country's capital, Managua. He faced enormous difficulties in doing so (BROOKES 2014):

> Finding anything in downtown Managua was virtually impossible. There had been an earthquake in 1972. Most of the downtown buildings had been reduced to rubble. … Locating addresses in the city was a strange exercise in historical geography. You ask anyone where they lived or where their office was, and they'd airily reply "Donde fue…"; where some place used to be, before the earthquake. . They knew [where places used to be beforehand]; I didn't; I got lost.

Brookes found that directions would be given in a form such as "400 metres from where the post office used to be", which was a style of address of absolutely no use to the visitor. The post office had been destroyed, and there was nothing any longer on the ground to substantiate the address. Yet in the absence of new landmarks built since the earthquake, this indirect and historical method proved to be a perfectly adequate locational system for Managuans themselves.

Using the addresses of non-existent features is not limited to instances of historical geography such as in earthquake-shattered Managua. The waypoint names used in international aviation also relate to features that do not exist – and indeed never have existed – except as geographical coordinates, mental constructs of the human imagination with no visible representation on the ground. Such waypoints denote locations in the sky at which pilots are instructed to report their progress to local air traffic control. Each waypoint is given a five-letter name, written in upper-case letters, and the opportunity to create such names has allowed for an element of humour to be introduced into the naming process. Thus for example three waypoints forming an arc in the Tasman Sea are named WALTZ, INGMA and TILDA, collectively forming the title of one of Australia's best-known songs (VANHOENACKER 2015: p66). Waypoint names, then, relate to features that are absent in reality. They remain largely arcane, known only within aviation circles, except on the rare occasion that a waypoint features as the last point of communication for an airliner that does not reach its intended destination. It was for such a reason that the waypoint TASIL, in the Atlantic Ocean between Brazil and Senegal, achieved brief public notoriety as the final radio calling-point of Air France Flight 447, which disappeared on a flight from Rio de Janeiro to Paris in June 2009.

Of course, there is an infinite number of geographical coordinate intersections covering the world. For the most part they simply provide a basic reference system, especially for the notation of unnamed features. They are ubiquitous; present even in locations where toponymic absence and silence reign. Surprisingly, perhaps, this fact was neatly noted at a question-and-answer forum in Rostov, southern Russia, in January 2012, addressed by Russian President Vladimir Putin. Speaking of an abandoned and dilapidated plant that had formerly been a thriving part of the Rosvertol helicopter works, near Rostov, a member of the audience remarked forlornly to the president: "Mr Putin, all that is left over there is nothing but geographical coordinates" (GOV.RU 2012). What that participant in the audience was telling us, in other words, was that the toponymic absence there was total.

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