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THREE AND ONE-HALF ELIJAHS

A Somewhat Onomastic Essay

9 And . . . Elijah said unto Elisha, Ask what I shall do for thee before I be taken away from thee. And Elisha said, I pray thee, let a double portion of thy spirit be upon me.

10 And he said ... if thou see me when I am taken from thee it shall be so unto thee. . . .

11 ... And Elijah went up by a whirlwind into heaven.

12 And Elisha saw it, and he cried. My father, my father And he saw him no more

13 He took up also the mantle of Elijah that fell from him, and went back and stood by the bank of Jordan.

Thus the King James Bible, II. Kings, Ch. 2, 9-13, with substantial omissions. And thus my text as nearly as I have one; but far be it from me to venture a sermon. Nor, surely, would I hazard a biblical exegesis. My concern is particularly with a couple of men whose name was Elijah, and I have rather fancily called what follows a somewhat onomastic essay because I am also concerned with the matter of naming. I presume that it is with Kings and Chronicles, though primarily with Kings, that at least my Elijahs begin and to which I shall briefly, if indirectly, return.

This ur-Elijah of II. Kings appears to me to have been a kind of divine trouble-shooter directed to see that the rulers of the line of David and their people kept their covenant with his Lord. I should remind you of the bare bones of his story. He first appears to Ahab, king of the Israelites, at a time when Ahab had been tempted, along with his people, into the worship of Baal. Elijah announces that "As the Lord, the God of Israel, liveth, before whom I stand, there shall not be dew nor rain these years, but according to my word." Then, as God tells him to do, he disappears into the desert, leaving Ahab perhaps to wonder what has brought this possibly impending disaster. Elijah is supported in the desert for a period by food miraculously brought by ravens. God then instructs him to go to Zeraphath, where he will find a widow who will sustain him during the course of the widespread drought.

And so he does, and she does with ever-replenished flour and oil. God next commands him to show himself again to Ahab. He does so and informs him of how he has angered God and

instructs Ahab to gather the people of Israel at Mount **Carmel** along with the prophets of Baal. There he demonstrates the power of the true God by proposing that he and the prophets of Baal contend by each preparing to sacrifice a bullock and calling down the fire of their gods to light the sacrificial pyres. It is, not surprisingly, no contest: The fire of the **Baalites** remains unlit; Elijah's bursts into flame despite its having been doused with water and surrounded by a trench of water, and he is celebrated as the representative of the true God. He slays all the prophets of Baal, and the rains come to relieve the drought. Ultimately he is directed to **annoint** new kings over Syria and Israel and to annoint **Elisha** "to be prophet" in his place. He finds Elisha, who follows him and "ministers" to him until he is swept into heaven by a whirlwind and Elisha succeeds symbolically to his mantle.

I had at least two uncles who bore the name Elijah; to the best of my knowledge neither received the mantle of the prophet—though one of them surely had evangelistic inclinations. The name is nonetheless a weighty one to bear. It is interesting that we speak easily of "bearing" or "carrying" a name, as though it were a thing of substance requiring some support. At the very least it may suggest continuity and family history. It may also, of course, suggest simply the fashion of a particular time or the practices of a culture or religion, or independence of all these. Those who have read Laurence Sterne's strange and wonderful eighteenth-century novel, *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*, may remember Tristram's father Walter. Among other theories that cluttered his brain, he held that there is a "magic bias" which "good or bad" Christian names "**irresistably** [*sic*]" impress upon our characters and conducts." Thus his attempt to alleviate the disaster of his newborn infant's nose, which had been broken in delivery at the incompetent hands of the "man-midwife" Dr. Slop, for Walter had a theory of noses too. He was to be christened **Trismegistus**, who was, says Walter, "the greatest of all earthly beings—he was the greatest king—the greatest lawgiver—the greatest philosopher..." and so on. Thus, says Walter, "We shall bring all things to rights." Like virtually all plans in the novel, that one goes awry and the child ends up being christened Tristram, a name of dire portent indeed (IV, **viii-xiv**).

But any name may be metaphorically "weighty," depending, I suppose, upon the resilience of the bearer. I have the given names of my father and grandfather, and my son bears ours. The "**Keith**" as a family surname goes back more generations than those. And I suppose that it pleases me somewhere in the back of my rather conservative mind that I belong to such a group. So, I presume, with some of you. Some names can no doubt be real burdens. One of my uncles was named **Barzilla**. It's familial as well as biblical, but Oh dear! He died with its having been understandably changed by common usage to Basil, which is inscribed on his tombstone. I recall an evening some years ago when the satirical **monologist** Mark Russell appeared in

Cincinnati. Among other current foibles, he toyed briefly with then fashionable girls' names and wondered how they would sound in later life, when the blooming young ladies had withered and found themselves in nursing-home wheel chairs to be greeted by some young attendant: "Good morning, **Bambi**; good morning. Heather." And so on. One of my childhood summertime neighbors was a girl who later married a man by the name of Morris Tart. They shortly had a daughter whom they christened Cherry—Cherry Tart. That is only simple-minded. It takes real perversity, I should think, to name a child as the parents of one of my wife's college classmates did. She was always known simply by her initials as "**U.T.** Miller." Her parents had wished to commemorate the place where they had met and fallen in love, and that, to her misfortune—or so I think—happened to be the University of Texas. But perhaps she positively enjoyed it. Or perhaps she later changed her name to something like Ursula Theresa; or perhaps she brazened it out and lived only grateful that her mother and father had not met at the Southern Hawaii Institute of Technology. In any case, names are not to be toyed with.

Even with his actual presence in my childhood, I cannot say that I really knew much about my great uncle Elijah Stewart. I am pretty sure that he came from Bible-reading and church-going parents and that the name carried at least some family resonance with it. He was of the same generation of parents who named my Uncle **Barzilla**. He and my Great Aunt Alice lived with their one daughter on a farm on the south edge of the small town in which I grew up. The place was close **enough** to walk to in half an hour or so, but far enough that the several town **Stewarts** saw much more of one another than of the farm Stewarts. Physical distance was, perhaps not the only reason. The distinction was never stated and may not have been consciously held, but we were **townies**, and they weren't. Certainly they lived closer to the bone than we ever did, even during the depression of the **nineteen-thirties**.

As a small boy I was a bit afraid of Uncle Elijah and recall him primarily as a large and droopy white moustache and a severely limited tolerance for young fellows like me. He died during my childhood, and my one clear memory of him otherwise is of his driving into town on his farm wagon behind one great heavy farm horse. In my boyhood there was only one other man who drove a horse and wagon in town, and that was a distant, unknown, and possibly crazy old fellow named Henry Stark, who lived by the local gravel pit and dealt in junk. Nevertheless, the sight of Uncle Elijah slouched on the seat of his wagon, pipe in mouth, creaking through town enthralled me. My substantially older sister had advanced into teen-age snobbery and was only embarrassed. This says little of Elijah Stewart, except that he worked a farm, which, aside from a dairy herd of the past, was probably stocked only to sustain his small family. He also had had the wit to marry a bright, if somewhat waspish, woman who lived to the age of 103 and to father a bright daughter, who long outlived her. Family story has it that she had started as a promising

student at the University of Washington about the time of the First World War. Uncle Elijah had found himself without a farm hand—all such fellows having been drafted or having found better paying things to do—and as a father then might easily do had brought her home to help with his milk route and other chores. There she stayed, by the time I knew her dryly humorous about it all, while she grew tan and stringy over decades of decreasing farm work. Ultimately she became bent almost at right angles, and so deaf that alone and asleep in her aging farm house, the land around it mostly rented out, the trees and shrubs growing closer, she couldn't hear thieves breaking into her barn and at least twice into the house. There they wandered about helping themselves to what they wanted of the family's past, there being little of the present worth taking

Some years ago I came into possession of a piece of that past—Great Uncle Elijah's shaving mug. It sits now on a bathroom counter holding toothbrushes. It is perfectly respectable white crockery, its lip edged with a pinky-orange band, and in handsome gilt Gothic script the name, E. S. Stewart—Elijah S. Stewart. What a condition for a once prophetic name to come to! I had not known Elijah's middle initial and it was only recently that I found that the initial S. stood for Slack—Elijah Slack Stewart. And that brings me to my third Elijah. As Elijah Slack Stewart was my great uncle, so Elijah Slack was his.

It is a name not entirely unknown in Cincinnati. A letter in the periodical *Liberty Hall and Cincinnati Gazette* for Monday, 20 October 1817, from Samuel W. Davies, writing for the board of the local Lancastrian Seminary announces the engagement of "the Reverend Mr. Elijah Slack, Vice President of Princeton College, to take charge of that school, at the commencement of the next quarter." The writer continues, congratulating the board's fellow citizens "on the acquisition of so valuable a teacher" and notes the "approbation" of his conduct of the "second office in the celebrated institution" (i.e., the College of New Jersey, which would become Princeton University) and the "regret of his colleagues on his departure." One may wonder, but more of that later. Finally, it is said that the Rev. Mr. Slack will bring with him "complete chemical and philosophic apparatus" and will teach any of the branches of education available "in Eastern Colleges."

So Elijah Slack came to Cincinnati as President of its Lancastrian Seminary. I should add here that what distinguished a Lancastrian school was the principle that older and more mature students could serve as tutors for the younger ones, thus allowing a substantial number to be taught with a minimum of faculty members—a method which some of us will recognize, not always happily, at the university level. Slack's previous and subsequent career is well documented in several sources. The most knowledgeable that I have seen appeared in 1989 in two parts in the newsletter of the Cincinnati Section of the American Chemical Society

(CINTACS), written by William Jensen, Professor of Chemistry (and historian of science) at the University of Cincinnati. My information about Slack professionally is heavily dependent upon his knowledge.

Slack had been born in Bucks County, Pennsylvania, in 1784, a descendant of Dutch and Irish families, his father's Dutch ancestors having immigrated to this country when New York was still New Amsterdam. He had a limited country schooling, but a conversion to Presbyterianism in his youth perhaps led him to ministerial ambitions and further education. He graduated from the Trenton, New Jersey Grammar School in 1805 (that is, at the age of 21), and proceeded as a somewhat aging undergraduate to enter the College of New Jersey. He took his undergraduate degree three years later and became principal of a classical academy in Trenton while he finished his theological studies in Princeton. He received his M. A. and his ministerial license in 1811.

It was only a year later that Slack was appointed Professor of Mathematics, Natural Philosophy, and Chemistry at The College of New Jersey as well as its first Vice-President. He was twenty-eight at the time. As Jensen and others have made clear, this rather sudden elevation was probably not the result of Slack's distinction in any field which he was expected to profess. The early years of the nineteenth century were evidently years of discontent and, indeed, riot in early American college education. The religious training for which colleges had usually been founded was evidently coming into conflict with the ambitions of young Americans, and the recent revolution had perhaps encouraged any natural youthful rebelliousness among them. At Princeton specifically, insubordination and breaches in discipline led to severe disciplinary action which resulted only in more serious riot. In an attempt to restore order the severely Presbyterian Board of Trustees forced the then president into retirement and replaced him as well as Slack's distinguished immediate predecessor. It is likely that Slack's own appointment to the professorship resulted more from his clerical function than his scientific competence. Worse, as Princeton's first Vice-president he was specifically charged with keeping order.

In the years following Slack's elevation rioting continued, coming to a magnificent climax when the students packed a hollow log with gunpowder and set it off behind the center door of Nassau Hall. The explosion blew out windows and cracked the walls from top to bottom. After that, in response to what they took to be overly long reading assignments, students nailed shut the doors and windows of Nassau Hall and began ringing the bell in the steeple. Slack found his way in and barely escaped being brained by a glass decanter thrown by a student. "Ah!" Slack is reported to have said, "You missed your aim!" Slack was not an ironist. A few days later during another riot students found him, as a historian of Princeton has said, "stalking up and down on the first floor of Nassau Hall," from which they drove him. Not a satisfactory position for a reverend vice

president to find himself in. Still, even the then president of the college himself could do nothing but stand in his doorway "shaking his cane at the rioters." The chapter in which T. J. Wertenbaker's history of early Princeton contains these and similar distresses of college life in the early nineteenth century he entitles "Princeton's Nadir" (*Princeton 1746-1896*, 1946, pp. 153-83).

Admittedly, any Elijah might well have difficulty coping with such circumstances, though *the* original might conceivably have had help from his immediate superior. In any case by 1817 criticism of Slack and the rest of the college administration was such that he resigned from the faculty and moved to Cincinnati, as the announcement in *Liberty Hall and Cincinnati Gazette* reported. Despite the self-congratulatory tone of that announcement by the Board of the Lancasterian Seminary, Slack may well have been pleased to leave Princeton, and the College of New Jersey may not have been displeased to have him do so. About fifty years later, all earlier crises past, Princeton awarded him an honorary doctorate of laws.

I shall not entangle myself in the many ins and outs of the somewhat rackets early history of the University of Cincinnati as Cincinnati College and its ultimately connected medical school nor specifically in Elijah Slack's (and others') running engagement with the locally more eminent and popular Daniel Drake. Some time ago I asked one of my medical friends, a long-time member of the Medical School faculty if he was aware of Slack, to which he replied, "Oh yes, he was a bad man." When later I turned to another, similarly connected, he simply said, "Well, he did win." I gather that the negative response was the result of his responsibility as one of the majority of two members of the faculty of three for voting Drake off the faculty of the Medical College of Ohio in 1822. Perhaps that was also the win. Or perhaps he won by virtue of simple persistence and longevity. And Daniel Drake, for all his intelligence, imagination, ambition, skill, and apparent charm, had a history of finding projects which he initiated not going quite the way he wanted them to and so moving on to another.

The Lancasterian Seminary, then, was organized with Slack as President as well as Professor of Mathematics, Natural Philosophy, Chemistry and Mineralogy in 1818. When in 1819 that institution merged with the new Cincinnati College, Slack continued as President of the whole. However, the desire of Cincinnatians for advanced education was evidently not strong enough to maintain the College, and after several years of financial struggle. Slack resigned as President in 1822. His financial difficulties are suggested by a pair of brief letters from him to General William Lytle among the Lytle Papers in the library of the Cincinnati Historical Society. The letters are undated, but the back of one is inscribed, "Cincinnati June 1822...." In one he asks for the sum of \$12.33 as part of what is owed him of his "back dues from the college" so that he can "settle some small accounts." In the other he explains that he has been without money for

"about 4 days," and unable to get any from the college, he asks for some "for my family's immediate support/" Slack had married on the financial hopes of his earlier appointment at the College of New Jersey and would ultimately have eight children, at least some of whom must already have increased his need in 1822. By 1823 his successor to the presidency was sufficiently oppressed by the needs of the struggling institution that he resigned and Slack returned as Vice President, rejecting an offer of the presidency. As such, as Jensen says, he "managed to keep the school afloat until 1825," when it ceased instruction because of lack of funds. By 1827 all its operations had been suspended (McGrane, p. 12).

The temporary closing of Cincinnati College did not leave Slack jobless, however. Under the aegis of Daniel Drake, the Medical College of Ohio had opened in 1820, with Slack as Professor of Chemistry as well as Registrar and Treasurer, along with Drake and another, who was Professor of Anatomy. It was those two who saw Drake off the faculty in 1822. Distress among the citizenry at this was such that they were pressed to reinstate Drake, who understandably refused the reappointment. Following an act by the legislature late in 1822, a Board of Trustees was appointed which, by way of reorganization, appointed a new faculty, which included Slack and three others. Drake was offered a chair but accepted an appointment at Transylvania University. All remained relatively quiet for a number of years, and the Medical College prospered until 1830, when Drake's threat to establish a competitive medical school at Miami University succeeded in placing him and his candidates in power and removing Slack at the end of the 1830-31 session.

Slack left Cincinnati in 1837 to head a private high school for girls in Brownsville Tennessee, about which I have been able to find nothing. In 1844 he returned to Cincinnati, where, according to Jensen he supported himself by giving private classes in the sciences as well as lectures at the Ohio College of Dental Surgery and, briefly at the Cincinnati College of Medicine and Surgery. He was also, of course, licensed as a Presbyterian minister and may have gained some income from work for the church. He is listed in the Cincinnati directories for those years as a "physician" or an "allopathic physician," a "Reverend," and once (1857) as "Professor." He lived at the time in the Mount Auburn area, with various addresses listed in the Cincinnati Directory, mostly on Milton Street, near which, running off the present Highland Avenue, is a Slack Street, named in his honor. Whatever the difficulties in his relationships with the beginnings of the University of Cincinnati, he was awarded an honorary MD by the Medical College of Ohio in 1863. He died in 1866 and is buried in Spring Grove Cemetery.

As a scientist it is clear from all reports that Slack was a teacher rather than a researcher or innovator. As an educator he was active, giving in his early years in Cincinnati a series of public lectures on chemical matters (this in conjunction with Daniel Drake). He was one of the

founders of the Historical and Philosophical Society of Ohio (McGrane, *The University of Cincinnati*, 1963, p. 10) as well as a founder of the Western Literary Institute and College of Professional Teachers, which met annually to discuss educational matters. As Jensen notes, his small booklet on *Chemical Nomenclature* (1828) was "the first known work on chemistry to be written and published in Cincinnati." It is variously reported that as a teacher he was unattractive in appearance and manner, diffuse and pedantic in his lectures, lacking in the dexterity to demonstrate chemical experiments successfully, and utterly humorless. The first President of the Alumni Association of the Medical College of Ohio, characterizing his former teachers one by one remarked that "Slack was 'a rather slow, heavy man' but a good chemist" (McGrane, p. 19). The one specific reference to his teaching reported by Otto Juettner, the biographer of Daniel Drake, concerns a lecture in which Slack was demonstrating the composition of water. Holding up a pig's bladder inflated with hydrogen, he announced to his audience, "Ladies and Gentlemen, I shall now fill my bladder and proceed to make water." His audience was unaccountably amused (*Daniel Drake and his Followers*, 1909, p. 48).

It is not surprising to find that in curricular matters he was on the side of what he took to be the angels rather than that of writers of imaginative literature. *The Transactions of the 6th Annual Meeting of the Western Literary Institute and College of Professional Teachers* in 1835 published the report of a committee of three appointed to consider the question, "To what extent may the reading of fictitious compositions be rendered beneficial to students?" The majority of two concluded that as imagination is a part of man's nature, so a man without it is imperfect. It thus approves of the ancient as well as English "classics" as well as contemporary moral fiction, which, however, excludes the "'Tales of the Heart' written by women and their male imitators." Slack was the minority of one who responded that all writing in which the imagination leads readers away from the facts of nature is suspect, probably dangerous. So even if Sir Walter Scott (one of the majority's "classics") has done much to moralize the nature of fiction, he has also popularized a kind of reading which in general spreads "a moral pestilence over the land" (*Transactions of the 6th Annual Meeting of the Western Literary Institute and College of Professional Teachers*, 1837, p. 223).

What can one conclude about this particular Elijah? Perhaps it is fair enough to say that he was an intelligent man, dedicated to educating the young and to spreading knowledge of chemistry especially insofar as the knowledge of nature enhanced the human appreciation of divinity; a useful person, who was also rather dull, unimaginative—a solemn man. Twenty years before his death he wrote to a nephew a letter dated from Prospect Hill, which concluded with these sentences, of which Jensen quotes part, which may also summarize his career (he would have been 62 at the time):

Everything appears in motion but our lives will soon be past. The important point is to be prepared to meet our God. Thou' I have assisted in educating as many as any one on this side of the Allegheny mountains between 8 and ten thousand young men and females—I know that I am but an unprofitable servant. Youth is the time to secure an interest in the great redeemer. Then life is enjoyed to the greatest advantage. The worldling as such never dreams of the joys of the Christian. If you want to enjoy life be in sincerity a religious man. Write soon.... [and so on}

What is clear is that, Walter Shandy's theory of names notwithstanding, the influence which a given name has over its bearer is severely limited, to say the least. It may please a rich aunt, or satisfy a current fad; it may even help elect one to public office, or embarrass its holder; but it is highly unlikely to confer talent, or intelligence, or wisdom, and surely not prophetic validity. What has also become clear to me is that, as is the case in Walter Shandy's household, plans do not necessarily turn out as intended. So with this essay. It began as one on two Elijahs in whom I was interested and ended up being partly about names. Now, even that consideration seems in danger of vanishing into itself, forced to the conclusion that, except as a label, a name doesn't mean much of anything. But not quite.

The marvelous translation of that original Elijah, swept up to heaven by a whirlwind, is recalled with no mention of the prophetic name by John Dryden in his poem *Mac Flecknoe, or A Satyr upon the True-Blue Protestant Poet, T. S.* (1682). The "T. S." of the title is Thomas Shadwell, with whom Dryden conducted a running literary feud and who ultimately succeeded Dryden as poet laureate. The Flecknoe of the title is one Richard Flecknoe, whom Dryden took to be a dull fellow and a bad poet; thus T. S. is patronymically identified as "Mac Flecknoe." The tone of the poem may be indicated by several early lines in which Flecknoe, who is portrayed as having been long the absolute ruler, priest, bard of the realms of nonsense, identifies Shadwell as his successor:

. . .for [the imagined Flecknoe announces] Nature pleads that He
Should onely [sic] rule, who most resembles me:
Sh—— alone my perfect image bears,
Mature in dulness from his tender years;
Sh—— alone of all my Sons is he
Who stands confirm'd in full stupidity.
The rest to some faint meaning make pretence,
But Sh——never deviates into sense. (11.17-20)

And so on, at destructively entertaining length. When finally Flecknoe passes his doubtful powers on to Shadwell, he is interrupted by these lines from the poet narrator:

(And I must interrupt with a preliminary note: In the following lines, "Bruce" and "Longvil" are characters in one of Shadwell's plays, and the "Trap" is, of course, a trap door in the floor of a stage.)

He said, but his last words were scarcely heard,
For *Bruce and Longvil had a Trap prepar'd,*
And down they sent the yet declaiming Bard,
Sinking he left his Drugget robe behind,
Borne upwards by a subterranean wind,
The Mantle fell to the young Prophet's part
With double portion of his Father's Art. (11. 211-17)

As is common to allusions, there is a tacit assumption of knowledge, reference to which will enrich what we are given. Here there is no name, but we miss the nice climactic irony of this subterranean descent (for *dulness* cannot rise) unless we remember what all those parts refer to: the upward sweeping wind, the mantle, the young heir, the double portion of the "Father's Art." We need to supply the original name and its context. Of course—Elijah.