

ROUGHHEWN ENDS

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My learned friend, Dr. H. K. Wombat, seldom stirs abroad from his home overlooking the Southern California coast from the Palos Verdes peninsula to Malibu. This is not for fear of being stared at -- for the Los Angeles Basin offers far more bizarre denizens than an elderly marsupial dressed in cap and cape -- but because the savant is constantly occupied in his own projects and thoughts, some of which I have been privileged to communicate to you. Still, at times the doughty diprotodont does indeed sally forth, as, for instance, to a bookstore at Rosewood and Western, which he favors because the Struldruggian proprietor refuses to pay the phone company what it demands for a telephone and marks nearly every book ten dollars, but is prepared to dicker. The store is in a changing neighborhood which means that it is taken over by swart and hard-faced characters after dark and everybody lives in apartments; the proprietor has been beaten and robbed; and even the Wombat has lost his wallet there.

Thus it was on one April day between two of the storms which this winter and spring have made Southern California almost lush and have washed the smog away to reveal vistas unseen by any but the most ancient of oldtimers that the pundit and I were taking a drive after he had replaced his stolen driver's license. For all his avid interest in the world the Wombat rarely strays far from his literary, linguistic, and historical concerns, but he could not fail, while we crawled down Sunset Boulevard, to notice that nearly every corner east of Schwab's Drugstore to the Freeway had its contingent of trollops dressed for the most part in shorts and leotards that startlingly displayed their turgescient charms, while, between corners, were seen others in the same uniform, often looking invitingly back over their shoulders. Unsolicited testimony to the preeminence of America that some were even beautiful! At one corner staked out by a striking pair, white and black, inserted into taut second-skins of cobalt blue and malachite green the Wombat whistled noiselessly and I observed, "It's worth going around the block to take another look, but that would hardly be cricket, because these two would interpret it as an invitation to jump right into this car like grasshoppers."

"The poetry of earth is never dead," quoth my furry fere. "But here you should consult a herpetologist before reading any earthy poesy."

"A herpetologist!" exclaimed I. "These flamboyant Phrynes are
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of course proffering passers-by the fruit with which Eve beguiled Adam, but what's the need for snakeologists here?"

"My dear boy," explained the Wombat, "the currently craved craft of the herpetologist concerns herpes. You must divine my meaning. And let's not put the fair sex down by dredging up Oriental allegories."

Then he continued, "Be that as it may, 'The poetry of earth is never dead' is the first line of John Keats' beautiful sonnet "On the Grasshopper and the Cricket" which he wrote in about fifteen minutes in amicable competition with Leigh Hunt. Your reference to 'cricket' and 'grasshoppers' reminded me of it." The marsupial, a mnemotechnician if ever there was one, repeated the whole sonnet, analyzed it for me, octave and sestet, and finished by saying, "The latest edition of the Encyclopedia Britannica errs when it states that the sonnet was written in a bouts-rimés contest with Leigh Hunt. This is proven without cavil by the first line of Hunt's sonnet, 'Green little vaulter in the sunny grass.'"

"'A boory Mae contest?'" I questioned. "Does that have anything to do with a peasant girl named Mae?"

"Really, dear boy, sometimes you seem to misunderstand on purpose. 'Bouts-rimés' is French for 'rhymed ends,' that is ends of verses. Let us postpone discussion thereof until we have returned home." He seemed to be conjuring something up before his inward eye and impulsively murmured, "That blue broad sure boasted a libidinous body!"

"Libido lies in the eye of the beholder," I replied. "Put her down in certain politically powerful parts of San Francisco and no one would look twice."

The Wombat snorted, "Of all the played-out burgs in creation you choose Frisco, the national leader in alcoholism, suicide, perversion, and general all-round overblown puffery!" He huffed to himself and said no more for the duration of the drive.

Forty-five minutes later we were seated in The Marsupium's oriel window coddling cups of Coatepec coffee and crushing 'twixt our cupid's candied kumquats stuffed with walnuts and pecans.

"Now, about bouts-rimés. In Joseph Addison's Spectator No. 60 of May 9, 1711, he discusses them and quotes the Menagiana of Gilles Ménage (1613-1692) -- not quite to the purpose, be it said -- for the classic definition and mise-en-scène of bouts-rimés is to be found in Ménage's edition of the works of Jean-François Sarasin (1603-1654)." The Wombat jumped up, scurried over to a book-lined wall, and returned bearing a small leather-bound volume.

"When dealing with anything always go to the locus classicus; in this case it is Ménage's statement of the Subject of the Poem 'Dulot Vanquished or the Defeat of the Bouts-Rimés,' Volume II of the aforesaid work, pages 247 ff. of the 1688 Paris edition." And he translated viva voce as follows, which can be found nowhere

else in English to this extent.

Bouts-rimés have been known only for a few years. The folly of a ridiculous poet named Dulot gave rise to that invention. One day when he was complaining in the presence of several people that he had been robbed of some papers, and particularly three hundred sonnets that he regretted more than all the rest, as someone was astonished that he had written such a large number of them, he replied that they were blank sonnets, that is, rhymed ends [bouts-rimés] of all those sonnets, which he intended to fill up. That seemed droll, and afterwards people began to play at gatherings, as a kind of game, what Dulot did seriously, each one vying to fill up felicitously and easily the outlandish rhymes that were given him. They were usually chosen of such a kind as to increase the difficulty, although, in the judgment of the cleverest, these rhymes are very often those which give the least trouble and which furnish the newest and most surprising things for that sprightly and burlesque style. There was a collection printed of that kind of sonnets in 1649. Some time thereafter, people seemed to lose their taste for them, and they were not so common until the year 1654 when a man very much less renowned for his great offices than for his great qualities brought them back into repute without thinking of it. For, as he had always known how to mix the diversion of belles lettres with the most important affairs of State, Justice, and Finances, by chance in one of those hours which public cares left him he put that type of sonnet to its true use and, playing around, wrote a sonnet in bouts-rimés on the Death of a Parrot of a Lady of Quality, whose name and merit are known to everyone. This example aroused all that there are of people in France who know how to rhyme; for several months one saw only sonnets on these same bouts-rimés, and their usual subject was either the Parrot or Sainte-Menehould [a commune on the western border of the Argonne Forest, Marne], which we had just retaken from the enemy. Monsieur Sarasin wrote one of those sonnets on the Parrot, but finally getting bored that that kind of poetry should, so to say, force all others out of circulation, he began everywhere to speak against bouts-rimés and conceived the plan of this poem, which he composed in four or five days and which he did not even have time to correct. It is a pleasant imitation of the heroic poem, which is the most serious and gravest of all, or at least an imitation of its main parts. The poet chiefly pays attention to two things in which epic poets usually make a special effort; one is what the Ital|ians call the Rassegna, the review, or the numbering of the troops and their leaders; and the other, the description of the fight. He pretends that the poet Dulot (to whom he gives the name of Herty, that madman of the Petites-Maisons [old Paris hospital for the insane], of whom there has been so much talk); that Dulot, I say, having formerly tried in vain to destroy good poetry, takes it into his head to have the Nation of Bouts-Rimés revolt and to lead them under arms to the gates

of Paris. He represents them as led by 14 rhymes that the Parrot was then making so famous. He then describes the army of good verses, the battle which was joined on the plain of Grenelle [now in Paris not far from the Eiffel Tower], the defeat of the Bouts-Rimés, the penalties imposed on the vanquished; and finishes his poem with the death of Dulot, as Virgil finished his with that of Turnus. He has filled this work with so many agreeable things that they should make the severest critics excuse those that he himself would have changed, had he lived ...

"A perfect subject for a Ph.D. thesis," was my reaction. "You have even left the illustrious minister and the Lady of the Parrot unnamed for the future doctorandus to find out by himself."

"Before you disparage it remember what Shakespeare said, that 'There's a divinity that shapes our ends, / Roughhew them how we will.' Even more to the point is La Rochefoucauld's Maxim 382, 'Our actions are like bouts-rimés which everyone makes refer to what pleases him.' or, in another version, '...bouts-rimés that everyone turns as pleases him.'

"Musicians dote on variations on given themes and improvisations. I don't see much difference between that much-lauded musical exercise and literary bouts-rimés. I have, in fact, read some splendid bout-rimé poems. Besides, you don't have to think much to appreciate music or what passes for it -- witness the absurd amounts earned by the untrained, like Barbra Strident.

"Again, bouts-rimés can be most revealing psychologically -- something like a verbal Rohrschach blot on which to build fantasies, phantasies, fancies, phallusies, and ... fallacies. This is illustrated by a book entitled simply Bouts-Rimés published in 1865 by that illustrious quadron Alexandre Dumas, a collection of 371 poems on a set of 24 bouts-rimés first proposed by Dumas to the poet Joseph Méry at a fashionable gathering. Dumas had again come into possession of the poem that Méry had written and on November 1, 1864, he proposed to his readers in the Petit Journal (about 200,000 subscribers) that they emulate Méry, the prize to be Méry's autograph poem. He was astonished to receive 220 replies (a return of 0.011 per cent) and on December 1 of the same year he solicited his readers for 1 franc each from 500 of them, for which they would receive a copy of the book containing the 220 poems. The solicitation was triumphant, and Dumas received 150 more poems, plus several not on the bouts-rimés. Méry's original was of course also included. Imagine being able to publish such a volume for only 500 francs, the equivalent of about \$500 at that time! Even making allowances for comparative purchasing power of money then and now such a hand-set book would be impossible today.

"You will be interested in the bouts-rimés with their principal meanings:

Femme	woman	Orestie	Oresteia
Catilina	Catilina	Gabrio	nickname of Baroness Gabrielle Dash
Ame	soul	Répartie	repartee; rejoinder
Fouina	slunk off, ratted	Agio	agio; speculation
Jongle	jungle	Figue	fig
Citoyen	citizen	Faisan	pheasant
Ongle	nail (of fin- ger or toe)	Ligue	league
Paièn	pagan	Parmesan	Parmesan; Parmigiano
Mirabelle	type of plum	Noisette	hazelnut
Mirabeau	Mirabeau	Pâté	paste; pastry
Belle	beautiful (fem. singular)	Grisette	shopgirl of easy vir- tue; dress material
Flambeau	torch, candle- stick	Bâté	loaded; pack-saddled

"The contestants had the most trouble fitting in fouina. One sly fellow made it foui n'a 'did not dig,' with a rare inversion. Bâté occurs more than 300 times with âné 'ass' to give âne bâté, which is a French phrase for 'unmitigated ass, dunderhead'; and grisette is used almost without exception to mean 'shop-girl, milliner, etc. of loose morals,' with a vast array of adjectives -- sweet, gentle, faithful, lively, loveable, and so on. The few women who sent in poems -- often superior -- were harder on the grisette.

"The production that won the Méry holograph was an inferior sort and I am surprised that Dumas thought so highly of it, but he was a story-teller, not a thinker -- a long list of hates, the eighth line on the touchstone word pagan being crude indeed. Social history in bouts-rimés!

"French critics take a snide view of this fascinating collection, but someday someone will analyze it profoundly -- or 'in depth,' as people like to say nowadays." The little creature quietly quaffed his Coatepec and, munching a kumquat, remarked in muffled tone, "I may take on the task myself, kumquat may!" Then he was up again and at the book-lined wall, returning with a magazine with a spiral design on a maroon cover.

"This has nothing to do with our former veep, Spiral Ague, but is a copy of the November 1977 issue of that estimable journal Word Ways, wherein" -- and with a flourish he opened the journal and pointed to the bottom of p. 239 -- "I espy Espy expatiating on exprompta espaliered across acrostics at the beginnings of lines and bouts-rimés at the ends. He does not, however, use the terminus technicus bouts-rimés, although we may be sure he knows it and is probably a whiz at them. By the way, there are several acrostics in the Dumas book, as well as a few poems with rhymes in reverse order.

"Your future doctorandus can write far more than 388 pages about the 388 pages of the Dumas book. Just think of it! A statis-

tician's delight! Graphs; frequencies; semantic classification; analysis by sex, social attitude, degree of education exhibited ..." The Wombat could have gone on and on, but he interrupted himself.

"In Spanish they have what are called pies forzados, literally 'forced feet,' which include both bouts-rimés and whole lines to be incorporated into poems, say, at ends of stanzas. We won't go into that, but when an author writes, say, a villanelle in which two lines must be repeated at specified places, as in the following scheme where the letters indicate the rhymes and the exponents the repeated lines:

a¹ba²aba¹aba²aba¹aba²aba¹a²

he is forcing himself to write pies forzados.

"We'll leave further research to your future doctorandus, who will have to cover German (no work can be complete without dealing with the German literature), Russian (where I'm sure there must be much material, because the chore in that polysyllabic and palatal tongue is not to try to find rhymes, but to try to avoid them), as well as other cultural languages, even unto Persian with its Firdausi, no mean rhymster, let me assure you.

"I will add, too, that most English limericks seem to be written by first choosing the rhymes for the first, second, and fifth lines, the more ludicrous the better."

Before I bade the Wombat farewell he had mentioned a whole list of writers, including almost every French poet since 1650, the Rossettis in England, and others who had written bouts-rimés; had repeated the following bout-rimé poem of which he was very fond; and had challenged all and sundry to better it if they could.

Escaping from the Indian breeze,
The vast, sententious elephant
Through groves of sandal loves to squeeze
And in their fragrant shade to pant;
Although the shelter there be scant.
The vivid odors soothe and please,
And while he yields to dreams of hope,
Adoring beasts surround their Pope.

"Pope John Paul II and his travels should fit right into those rhymes," I predicted.

"Indeed he should; and, being a second Mezzofanti, he may very well be a wordster and bout-rimeur himself." The Wombat brightened up and, getting his second wind, he began a .. -- but this must end somewhere. So, while you are trying your hand at bouts-rimés I will say farewell to you, too.