GOOD-BYE, DR. WOMBAT!

HARRY B. PARTRIDGE
Cambria, California

Wombat Manor had always had an air of distinction that set it apart from any other house, but now in the dying afternoon sunshine, even after a surprise Southern California September thunderstorm, its windows blankly reflected the light of the declining daystar and seemed to have lost their whilom sparkle.

"Dwelt-in houses are all different, undwelt-in houses are all alike. Can it be that the Wombat is leaving his lair, unique among messuages in the Golden State? Why has that elegant marsupial summoned me hither?" Such were the thoughts that roved bleakly through my mind as I drove up to the porte-cochère.

The manor's chatelaine met me at the door as usual, but the chic grey traveling suit enveloping her svelte form struck a foreboding note. A fringe of voile, depending from her smart toque, veiled her magnificent eyes. Wordless she led me through the empty echoing halls to The Marsupium. Bare were all the walls; denuded all the floors. The savant sat on a built-in seat in the oriel window and was himself dressed as though about to depart: a brown fedora drawn low over his forehead, a tan trench-coat disguising his rotund shape. Shades of the thirties! My friend's Bogartesque garb drew a smile to my lips despite the pang which invaded my heart.

"So kind of you to come on such short notice, dear boy," began the Wombat. "I wanted to bid you a personal farewell, not discourteously disappear from your ken."

"Then you are leaving," I murmured.

"I am. There is a time for all passages in mortal life. I have for some time been sessile; now for some time I will be mobile. The steroid set and sweat-freaks from the whole world will soon be dropping from the skies. An incredible influx of entrepreneurs dedicated to what the Spanish delicately refer to as La Vida ('The Life') - a term as incongruous when applied to their trade as that of 'gay' when applied to the sterile nastinesses of perversion - will soon come flooding into the Loose Angles basin; one prostitute will pump out pelf for herself, another, profit for her pimp; neither will benefit this Basin of Loss Angleless. One hundred thousand cars a day will pour down the two lanes on each side of minor traffic arteries. It may be the Last Traffic Jam. In short, this Basin of Lost Angels will become hostage to the Olympics!"

He sighed. "Tempora mutantur, nos et mutamur in illis."

1984 by Harry B. Partridge, Cambria, California
"Nice line," I sighed back.

"Yes," repeated the scholar, "'Times change and we change in them.' Do you know who said it?"

"Some classic, I guess. Maybe Lucretius."

"Not Lucretius, but a British Martial."

"A British marshal capable of such Latinity? No wonder the British Empire civilized the world! Gentleman Johnny Burgoyne of Revolutionary War fame was a popular playwright; Sir Charles Napier combined message and pun in his famous Peccavi ('I have sinned') when he defied express orders and captured Sind; and a certain Boer War subaltern (albeit half American) went on to win the Nobel Prize for Literature."


"Isn't 'Owen' Welsh for 'john'? John John, then. Reminds me of some of the kids with double-barreled names I knew in school like Thomas Thomas and George George." I wasn't sure the Wombat wasn't pulling my leg.

The Wombat grimaced. "Dittologies like those you mention, while striking, are less pleasing that subtler names like Melanie Cherney ('black' in Greek and Russian) or Natalie and Noel Yule ('Christmas' in French, French, and English) or Bella Jaffe Schoen ('beautiful' in Italian/Spanish, Hebrew, and German). Anyway, our Welshman Latinized his name as Ioannes Audoenus, not Ioannes Ioannes. 'Owen' is supposed to mean 'young warrior,' but why don't you research it?"

"Never heard of him."

"Probably because he published exclusively in Latin, in which he produced the best and largest body of epigrams in Neo-Latin literature, outshone only by Martial fifteen hundred years before. John Owen was one of those logologists, wordsters, paronomasiacs, and lords of linguistic legerdemain who trove in the British Isles during 'the spacious days of great Elizabeth.' Born in 1564, the same year as Shakespeare, he survived the Immortal Bard by some eleven or twelve years, probably dying between January 1627 and January 1628. It is easy to remember the number of his epigrams (1492) which he published in ten books. Forty-one of his poems are devoted entirely to word play, according to John R. C. Martyn, a recent (1976) editor of Owen, who brought out the first edition of the epigrams in 150 years; but this is surely a very low estimate, for a typically Welsh delight in words and their permutations and combinations is found on every page."

"The line from Owen that I quoted is the first one of a distich (suggested by an inferior couplet, a motto of Charlemagne's son, Lothaire I, by Matthew Borbonius) which in its entirety goes:

\[
\text{Tempora mutantur, nos et mutamur in illis;} \\
\text{Quomodo? Fit semper tempore peior homo.}
\]
change in

er the Brit-

irles Napier

lve sinned')

a certain

at. "A Brit-

w in school

lue Cherney

ie ('Christ-

es loannes.

'think you

n in which

omonomists, 

isles in 1564, the 

ery 1627 and 

is epigrams 

C. Martyn, 

first edition 

low esti-

of a distich

agne's son, 

Times change and we change in them.

How? Man always gets worse with time.'"

The Wombat was speaking feelingly. The cold room that had wit-

ested so many of the conversations in which we had "tired the

sun with talking and sent him down the sky" warmed up. Seeking

to sustain the congeniality that I had so often enjoyed in The Mar-
supium I encouraged the dear beast to continue as I asked "How

was he a logologist?"

"By his artful word play and wizardly way with words: etymol-

ogies, anagrams, puns, reversals, beheadments, tropes, dissections:

in fine, the wordster's whole arsenal! He could plumb profundities

and hoist himself to heights - all in two lines, four lines, rarely

more, of 'Latin, marble's language, pure, serene.' Take this line

with its enchanting alliteration, in sense far deeper than Tenny-

son's rather forced 'moan of doves in immemorial elms And mur-

muring of innumerable bees'.":

Mille modis morimur mortales, nascimur uno

In a thousand ways we mortals die, [but] are born in one.

Or this encapsulated anagram with its two opposed superlatives

standing side by side, but each indissolubly bound to its noun

because of the matching long A's at the ends of minima and mora

and short A's at the ends of maxima and Roma (the reference is

to Hannibal's fatal delay after Cannae, when Maharbal said to

him, 'How to conquer thou knowest, Hannibal; now to use victory

thou knowest not'): 

Servata est minima maxima Roma mora

Rome the greatest was saved by the smallest delay.

"And what could be truer or more melodious than this hemistich:

... finis amoris amarus

... the end of love is bitter.

"I also find most touching the polished praises he wrote to Hen-

ry, Prince of Wales, son of James I. But at the same time he also

dedicated a book of epigrams to the unfortunate Lady Arabella Stu-

wart, who some thought had a better right to the throne than James

himself. Alas, Owen stopped writing about 1613, shortly after the

death of Henry; and his three last poems are heartfelt plaints at

the demise of one who, had he survived to become Henry IX, would

have spared England its Civil Wars..."

My furry friend has an extensive knowledge of royal and noble

affairs. One of his deep-seated resentments seems to be that there

has never been a Henry IX in England; for, Jacobite like Dr. John-

son though he is, he balks at recognizing Cardinal York as Henry

IX. The Wombat also deplores the name William given to the present
Prince of Wales's son; for he fears that, as in so many dynasties, the name of the last king will duplicate that of the first. I will not mention how he bristles when he discusses the fates of the royal Arthurs! Mr. Dick had his King Charles's Head; the Wombat has several. So, to keep him from a long discursus, I hurriedly demanded, "Give me some examples of Owen's work that today's America wordster can appreciate."

"Well, how about this true etymology, or, rather, statement of cognates: English bed and Welsh beddi (spelled 'bed' in Owen's time):

Angli bed lectum vocitant, Cambrique sepulcrum;
 Lectus in tumuli, mortis imago sopor.
The English call a bed a bed, and the Welsh call a tomb a bed;
 A bed is indeed the image of a grave, and sleep the image of death.

Or this ancient etymology (found in Varro):

Dicta fuit mulier quasi mollior; est tamen Eva
 Non de carne sui sumpta sed osse viri.
Woman [mulier] is named as though she were softer [mollior], but Eve
Was not taken from her husband's flesh, but his bone.

"Owen has several epigrams on Eve, including an anagram set (Eva:Eve, vae:woe, ave:hail) in a couplet addressed to Adam:

Eva, parens mortis, malo te falsa lefellit;
 Cumque tuum strueret vae, tibi dixit ave.'
False Eve, the mother of death, with an apple deceived you,
And, as she was causing your woe, to you said 'Hail.'

"Owen was of his time in unmercifully using the second story of creation, found in Genesis 2, with its Adam-Eve-serpent allegory to belabor women; and like Shakespeare he was obsessed with the horns of cuckoldry. He even managed to work a Greek pun on kéras 'horn' and krēas 'flesh' into one quatrain. Let's skip this stuff that dates Owen.

"Here's a rather neat epigram showing Owen's skill at dissection, in this instance giving the word (trica) from which English 'trick' ultimately comes. Meretrix (plural meretrices), however, is in reality a derivative of mereo 'to deserve, merit, earn, gain, acquire' and means 'she who earns money.' Scortum 'whore' has the primary meaning of 'skin, hide.' Festus says that scortum has that secondary meaning because 'they [scorta] are worked like skins.' Interesting that skins, when tanned, lose their fur or hair.

Esse meras tricas meretrices, haud male dixti;
 Scorta tamen raros in cute trichas habent.
You said, by no means improperly, that meretrices (prostitutes) are mere tricks;
 But whores have few trichas (Greek, 'hairs') on their skin.
Note the neat Latin-Greek pun tricas-tricas. The observation is still true today: the more sexually active or would-be active a woman is, the more concerned is she that her skin be hairfree.

Also meanwhile, the trench-coated trencherman had opened his briefcase, which I had assumed was packed with necessities for his journey, perhaps even including a gat; but it proved to be stuffed with what turned out to be calissons (sugar-glazed wafers filled with canteloupe, almonds, and orange), amandas (chocolate- and-cocoa-dusted almond nougat), the small, flat, coin-like goat-milk cheeses known as rocamadour, and heaven knows what else. These he not only partook of, but proffered with his usual generosity.

"Well," said I between bites, "I guess the verses are supposed to be a limerick, although there are not any anapaests in it. Undoubtedly it is designed to display the words LARGE, REGAL, ALGER, ELGAR, GLARE, and LAGER, all spelled with the same five letters. Elgar probably serves his Glare Lager in a GRAEL or a GREAL."

"Right!" commended the Wombat, likewise munching from his portable larder. "Now contrast those forced anagrams with the artistry of

Recta fides certa est, arcet mala schismata, non est
Sicut Creta fides, ficitilis; arte caret.

The right faith is true, prevents evil schisms; it is not, like a Cretan's word, made of clay; it lacks artifice.

"Anyone can apply this to his own faith. The Cretan slur is a commonplace, and there are English reflexes of all the anagrams: RECTA - right, CERTA - certain, ARCET - ark, arcane, CRETA - Crete, CARET - caret."

The doors of The Marsupium opened; the chatelaine stood there and pointed with her right index finger at the back of her left wrist. "Ah, dear friend," said the Wombat rising and guiding me by the elbow toward the door, "I must go. I have enjoyed your friendship in our world of words, but now I am entering the world of deeds. Nevertheless, I would still enjoy your company if you
were able to follow me. Here is a little gift to remember me by, and a little something therein, which, if you can decipher it, tells you when and where to meet me."

We had reached the porte-cochère where stood a magnificent steel-blue 1930 Packard 745 Victoria coupé, its hood ornament of Daphne at the Well contemplating the driveway before her. The chatelaine, who had followed us out, retrieved a small package from her purse and handed it to the Wombat, who extended it to me, then opened the driver's door for his companion, walked around to the passenger's side, and climbed in as I performed for him the same office that he had for the chatelaine. The motor sprang to life, the window lowered, the Wombat stuck out his head and said, "just remember, I am not going to Athens."

The Victoria rolled smoothly off, its driver guiding it with her usual feline fluidity and panache, and disappeared around the gate. They were gone!

I raised the package and waved. "Good-bye, Dr. Wombat!" I called.

EPILOGUE

The gift turned out to be a small edition of Propertius beautifully bound in fine linen. In the quiet of my study I turned the pages over and admired the paper which had already lasted longer than the United States had existed. As I leafed it through, savoring not only the familiar lines, but the intense black ink that embodied them, I came to Elegy XXI of Book III, which begins

Magnum iter ad doctas proficisci cogar Athenas

I am forced to set out on a great journey to learned Athens.

A bit of thin paper fell out. Unfolding it to the size of a postcard I found myself looking at a small drawing: the gate of a courtyard stood open and gave a view of a river winding through apple orchards; a radiant sun stood high in the sky and streamed through the portal. Against a wall leaned a large X made of wood. What seemed to be thongs were bound near the end of each leg, and three of the legs shared four pronounced notches between them. In the foreground, compositionally balancing the wooden X, crouched a rabbit winking one eye, as though to say "Signum sapienti sat" (A sign to the sapient suffices). Quite in the lower right corner stood the letters UU PINX.

Yes, dear reader, by dint of deep thought, letting my inward eye stare past the symbols so that their meaning would impinge upon my peripheral mental retina, I solved the puzzle and divined the date and place.

What followed is another story. Farewell.

Editor's Note: Readers are invited to write to the Editor with their interpretations of the Wombat's rebus; these will be published in the next issue of Word Ways.