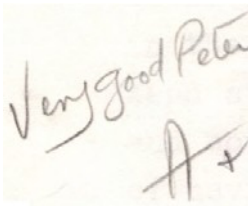


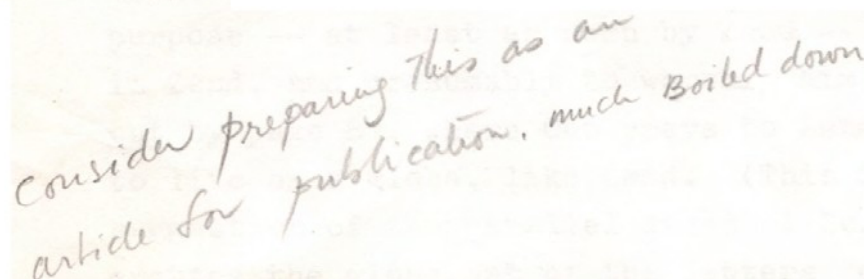
OAB by Zend by Ardo by Irdu by

"And if he left off dreaming about
you, where do you suppose you'd be?"

Lewis Carroll
Through the Looking Glass



Very Good Peter
A+



Consider preparing this as an
article for publication. much Boiled down

by Peter Marmorek

An essay submitted for English 362
Atkinson College, York University, Toronto

Circa 1974

In "Oab"¹ Robert Zend has created a theogony of a compelling richness. This richness extends "Oab" to many levels. On one it parallels parts of Genesis, using some of the philosophy of Spinoza to define basic attitudes and relationships between "man" and "god". On another level it parallels what Jung would call the archetypal myth. And on the most basic level it is a poetic exercise in fantasy and intellectual gamesmanship, imitative of the style of Jorge Luis Borges.

The voice which opens "Oab" is Zend's. (To avoid confusion, Zend will refer only to the character in the poem, not to the author unless stated.) Zend states that Oab (like himself) believes in Zend and not in God, and that he created Oab for the purpose of having this belief (p. 80). Thus Oab's original purpose—at least as seen by Zend—is to believe in Zend, and presumably to worship him. This is borne out by page 81, where Oab prays to Zend to be allowed to live on a globe, like Zend. (This is the first suggestion of the parallel lives of Zend and Oab.) Zend creates the globe out of the letters "g", "l", "o", "b", "e". Zend (the author) is using concrete poetry to play on the confusion between the symbol and the thing symbolized. Oab gets the symbol doubly—the word "globe", and the two-dimensional representation of a globe. He cannot get a real globe of course, because he lives on two-dimensional paper and a globe is three dimensional.

When Oab wants to be an individual (p. 82), "to be distinct from his surroundings," Zend tells him the other letters of the alphabet constitute his surroundings. Oab thus lives in an Aristotelian world: everything is Oab or Oāb. It is interesting that in Genesis² God divides light from darkness, water from firmament, etc. in a manner very analogous to how Zend separates Oab from the alphabet. As soon as he is an individual Oab changes in two ways. First, he views himself as separate, and hence becomes lonely, that is, conscious of his separateness as a negative state. He asks Zend for a mate, Zend makes a suggestion, which is refused, of taking the middle letter "a" out of Oab (in a parody of Genesis) and creating a mate for him. (The middle of Oab thus parallels Adam's rib.)³

The second result of Oab's individuality is that he develops a voice within the poem. After Zend has given him a meaningless prayer to say, Oab then writes a poem (p. 83) (mimicking the Bible's "I am Alpha and I am Omega saith the Lord"). These are the first words in the poem not written by Zend, and could only come after Oab reaches his individuality.

On page 84 we meet Ardo. "Ardo is a genius who understands everything" says Zend, which seems to imply that Ardo is a god, for only God understands everything in the world. Yet Ardo does not understand Oab which must mean Oab is of a different world from Zend, whom Ardo does understand. (Later Zend is shown to be a creation of Ardo, but if Ardo created Zend, then Zend is in the world which Ardo understands.) Zend sets Oab free, since he (Zend) realizes Oab is separate from him. Zend says, "create like God or me" (p. 84) which contradicts his earlier statement that he does not believe in God. Perhaps his creation has opened him to the idea of his creator.

Page 85 is Zend's story of the creation of Oab, telling how Oab was born out of Zend's mind. Spinoza says, "The human mind is part of the infinite intellect of God,"⁴ and in just such a manner is Oab part of Zend's mind. Zend hears Oab's name in the silence within him ("In the beginning was the word."⁵) and at first sees Oab as being himself - that is, created in his own image, ("Let us make man in our image, after our likeness"⁶) before Oab becomes an individual.

Next comes the legend of how Irdu was born (p. 86, 87). Oab tricks Zend into giving him the letters U, I, R, D with which he creates Irdu. The trickery of Oab reminds one of the snake's trickery in the Garden of Eden, and the overtones of the quest for knowledge which Oab uses to obtain the letters remind one that it was at the tree of knowledge of good and evil that Man first lied to God. Similarly Oab gets Irdu "because I was stupid" (p. 87) just as Adam ate the apple to become wise.

Oab now starts challenging Zend. First, they argue over whose creation is more miraculous (p. 88) and then Oab says to Irdu (who now enters the dialogue) that he is an atheist (p. 88). Thus he denies his original purpose, which was to believe in Zend. He then asks Zend if Zend was created. At this point Ardo asks if Oab

exists, and Zend answers "If he does, I don't." This must refer to Oab's atheism—for if he does not believe in Zend then Zend and he are impossible. Thus a belief in God (by man) is necessary for God's existence (an idea again reminiscent of Spinoza). Ardo then asks "Doesn't Oab exist?" and Zend answers "If he didn't I would be less," for if the human mind did not exist, God's intellect—hence God—would be less.⁷

Oab is sad that Irdu is more than him (p. 90), as on page 85 Zend was sad that Oab was more than him. Oab cannot have a world without Irdu now that he has created him. Both here and on page 91, Zend (the author) uses the concept of the world of Oab and Irdu as being a world of 26 letters (or of 19 letters not including themselves), just as our world is of 92 elements.

For six pages Oab and Irdu play games. These games play with, and within, the concepts of concrete poetry. While they do not develop the theogony, they are interesting in and of themselves. "Masks", for example, is reminiscent of R.D. Laing's "Knots" with its abstract style and its suggestion that we love the self that we see in others, rather than the other.

Page 95 points out that Zend is in control of these games; he creates them.

After Oab and Irdu have played Globe (p. 96), Oab questions Zend as to why they did not fall off their globe, and gradually this develops into a quest on the part of Oab to comprehend the third dimension, which is, as Irdu says, "what we don't know." To Oab up-destiny—is the point of Zend's pen. To Irdu, the limits of experience are Oab, for as Spinoza says,

"God is the...cause (of individual things) insofar as He is considered under that attribute of which they are modes, their ideas must necessarily involve the conception of that attribute, or, in other words, must involve the eternal and infinite essence of God."⁸

Thus as Oab is the God of Irdu, Irdu consequently does not know Zend.

Oab tries to find the third dimension (p. 100) and says in frustration to Zend "Just give me time." Time is Oab's third dimension (length, width, time) just as it is our fourth dimension, and when Zend tears his history of Oab (p. 101), it appears to set Oab free, possibly by freeing him in time, as he had asked. Certainly Oab is now completely free; he disdains publication by Zend, as he is planning to publish Irdu. Zend, whose power over Oab is waning, starts to realize (p. 102) that

he is only a creation of Ardo.

On page 103 Zend tries to talk to an independent Oab, who is creating Irdu. Zend doesn't understand Irdu, as Ardo didn't understand Oab (p. 84). Oab can now escape and leave the page at will (which he may do by moving in time, his third dimension). Oab says that when he is not with Zend, Zend is "alone on the page", again suggesting that Zend is a character in Ardo's poem. That the poem is Ardo's is brought out by Zend's dialogue with Ardo, which roughly parallels Oab's dialogue with Zend. Oab and Zend have changed typescripts on page 104; for the first time Oab is the larger and more dominant of the two.

What Zend is writing (p. 105) is no longer Oab, but now Zend. He does have control enough to cover the page with "Zend's." (One could ponder the fact that the page starts with "end" and ends with "Zen", but, as Horatio once said, "'twere to consider too curiously, to consider so."⁹)

Then, on page 106, it becomes obvious that Zend is dying and Oab is in control. McLuhan said, "We shape our tools, and thereafter our tools shape us." Zend created Oab, but Oab now dominates him. Zend's last words to Oab are a warning that Irdu will grow up, and the cycle will repeat itself. This is further emphasized pictorially, on page 107. Half-covered by Zend, half by Oab (22/45 by Oab, to be exact), it forms an obvious contrast to page 105. But here Zend is waning, Oab waxing. And in the lower right-hand corner is a single "Irdu", suggesting that his turn will come next.

Oab, over-confident, does not see this (p. 108). He is committing the sin of hubris, which will later inevitably cause him to go through what Zend is now undergoing. Zend as he "dies" has a realization that he is a character, and faintly he hears Irdu starting the next stage of the cycle, duplicating Oab's creation (p. 85) as he creates Ardo.

Page 107 is a mandala, showing visually the relationships in the poem. Oab is made by Zend, Irdu by Oab, Ardo by Irdu, and Zend by Ardo. The shape almost suggests the Yin and Yang with each element changing into its opposite.

The poem *Oab* is obviously symmetrical, the cycle which has

been described obviously repeats itself for each of the four. This cycle is none other than the archetypal hero myth, described by Jung as:

"... tale describing a hero's miraculous but humble birth, his early proof of superhuman strength, his rapid rise to prominence or power, his triumphant struggle with the forces of evil, his fallibility to the sin of pride (hybris), and his fall through betrayal or a 'heroic' sacrifice that ends in his death."

"In many of these stories the early weakness of the hero is balanced by the appearance of strong 'tutelary' figures -- or guardians -- who enable him to perform the superhuman tasks..."

"These godlike figures are in fact symbolic representatives of the whole psyche, the larger and more comprehensive identity that supplies the strength that the personal ego lacks. Their special role suggests that the essential function of the heroic myth is the development of the individual's ego-consciousness -- his awareness of his own strengths and weaknesses -- in a manner that will equip him for the arduous tasks with which life confronts him."¹¹

It is obvious that this exactly corresponds to Oab's story, which is right as the poem bearing his name is basically about him rather than Zend, Irdu, or Ardo. Jung tells us this pattern has profound psychological meaning and Oab must surely gain in power from its founding in the hero archetype.

One question remains: if Zend is both a character and an author, who then is Ardo, his creator? The answer to this lies in a story by Jorge Luis Borges, "The Circular Ruins."¹² In this story a man comes ashore to a ruined temple and in several years of extremely severe self-discipline creates a specific person through his dream. First he creates the heart, then other organs, 'till very gradually he brings the creature to life. But, because of the specific ceremonies he used to give his creature life, the creature is immune to fire. The dreamer finally completes his task, brings his creature to life and sets him free. Shortly after, there is a fire in which the dreamer himself is caught. But the fire does not harm him and, "in relief, in humiliation, in terror, he understood that he, too, was an appearance, that someone else was dreaming him."¹³

There is an obvious parallel between "The Circular Ruins" and "Oab." But to prove the creature dreamed is Zend, and the

dreamer is Ardo, we must go further. In "A Bunch of Proses", Zend says of Borges that he is conducting an "experiment in trying to dissolve my former self in his... I have no reason whatsoever to hide it since I consider him one of my spiritual fathers."¹⁴ A spiritual father is -- in a certain sense -- a creator of the child. A final proof lies in that the land of "The Circular Ruins," the land in which the dreamer created his creature, and the land in which the creature lived, is described by Borges only as a land where the people spoke "the Zend language..."

So *Oab* ends. As it is a complete and perfect poem in its complex inner structure, it is a joy to read. And as it reflects strangely ideas (and people) external to it, it is "something more than natural, if philosophy could find it out."¹⁶

Endnotes

- ¹ Robert Zend, *Oab*, Exile Vol I, No. I, Atkinson College
- ² *Genesis*, Chapter I, vs. 4,7
- ³ *ibid.* Chapter II, vs. 21-22
- ⁴ J. Ratner, *The Philosophy Of Spinoza*, Modern Library, 1927. Page 161
- ⁵ *Gospel of John*, Chapter I, vs. 1
- ⁶ *Genesis*, Chapter I, vs. 26
- ⁷ Spinoza, *op. cit.*
- ⁸ *ibid.*, page 188
- ⁹ Shakespeare, *Hamlet* Act V, Scene 1
- ¹⁰ Marshall McLuhan, *The Medium Is The Massage*, Columbia Records, Side I
- ¹¹ Carl G. Jung, *Man and His Symbols*, Laurel, page 101
- ¹² Jorge Luis Borges, "The Circular Ruins" (from) *The Aleph and Other Stories*, Bantam Books, 1971
- ¹³ *ibid.* page 40
- ¹⁴ Robert Zend, "A Bunch of Proses", Exile, Vol II, No. 2, Atkinson College
- ¹⁵ Borges, *op. cit.* page 34
- ¹⁶ *Hamlet* *op. cit.* Act II, Scene 2