

## THE WREKIN HEAVES

Or: *Philosophical Gas* 73

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28 November 1987 I keep on getting terse notes from Gerald Smith, OBE. Last time it was about money. This time: "John You owe 3 pages for the December mailing Gerald". So I do. Here they are. They'll probably be even scrappier than the three pages I had in the October mailing — which future ANZAPA historians may care to note were, in order of appearance, *Philosophical Gas* no.71, a preprint of my "Threepenny Planet" column for the October 1987 Society of Editors Newsletter, and *Philosophical Gas* no.72 (which, despite its heading, turned out to be published only in ANZAPA).

Further to what I wrote in PG 72: the union did indeed allow me to rejoin, but I did not last long as a full-time proofreader. I now have a part-time job as a proofreader, and that suits me much better. The work is physically and emotionally exhausting; physically, because most of the time I am reading at four or five times the speed I am used to; emotionally, because I must continually suppress just about everything I have ever learnt about writing and editing, and about proofreading for publishers. About 95 per cent of the stuff I read is badly written; all of it, so far, is edited either badly or not at all. My extensive stock of seemingly useless knowledge, however, is much valued, and on the whole I am enjoying the job very much. I have always liked people in the printing business — or to be more exact, the tradespeople in printing — and I like very much the atmosphere of a small business. Challenge Typesetting is certainly small: Kevin and Alan, the proprietors; big Rod and Shane on the Iteks, Susan and little Rod on the Macintoshes, Scott helping Alan in paste-up; Kerry, who comes in twice a week to do the books and make up the pay; and me. You grizzle about the rubbish you have to work with, but you do it. You don't watch the clock: you do what has to be done (and if it takes you into overtime, you are paid for it). No-one works harder or longer than the proprietors. No-one ever says anything about working as a team; it's perfectly obvious that you must, and that you do; and it's too precious a feeling to go putting labels on it.

It was certainly pleasant to read Bruce Gillespie one day last week. He writes record reviews for *The Melbourne Report*, which is a quite handsome publication, modelled on the *New Yorker*; unfortunately, most of its contributors write badly, and whoever sub-edits it is utterly incompetent. So I really enjoyed Bruce's stuff, and told him so. This sort of thing can



get you into trouble sometimes. In 1968 I wrote to Robert Silverberg to tell him how much I had enjoyed an article of his that I had proofread that day at Wilke's (where often enough I finished up reading the Melbourne telephone directory). He misunderstood the context, I think, and wrote back that if I appreciated him only for a piece of hack writing like that, I could stuff my jumbuck up my billabong.

Other authors, in other circumstances, are more appreciative. Gerald Murnane, I think, is pleased that I have proofread his new novel, *Inland*, for Heinemann. I'll find out tomorrow (my time; Thursday 3 December your time; too late, whichever way you look at it, to tell you what happens tomorrow and still meet the ANZAPA deadline), when Gerald and I are to meet and compare notes on our proofreading, whether he is pleased — especially with some of my alterations. We could, and possibly will, sit here for hours discussing his use of particular words, if only because to some extent that is what his novel is about. But I think he will be pleased that I altered "east of the Hume Highway" on one page to "west of the Hume Highway". Gerald is quite particular about the relationships between various places — to some extent that also is what his novel is about — and I therefore paid particular attention to locations, directions and distances while I was reading. In fact, this is the only book I have ever read, whether for money or pleasure or (as in this case) both, with a Melbourne street directory open in front of me for constant reference. The place he describes on one page as being east of the Hume Highway, the street directory clearly shows to be west. It is possible that this is a kind of trick that Gerald is playing — to some extent his novel is about tricks he plays, deliberately or inadvertently, on both himself and his reader — but I don't think so; I think he just screwed-up this time; so I can stop writing like him now.

On weekdays, for almost a fortnight, I have had to make the most extreme kind of mental gear-change between East Brunswick and Kingsbury. For Challenge Typesetting I mostly read at top speed, faster than my normal reading speed, picking up such misspellings and other mistakes as I find, and trying not to worry about those I don't find, since nobody else is likely to worry. From this I have come home to Gerald's book, in which not only must every last word appear in its correct place, spelt as Gerald wishes it spelt, but also every hyphen, comma, semicolon, colon, full stop, quotation mark and italicization. I worked out that, on average, I was reading five pages of Challenge Typesetting's stuff for each page of Gerald's book. Both kinds of reading are properly described as proofreading, but at work I am a printer's reader, at home a publisher's reader; being both, on the same day, for days on end, is a considerable test of one's adaptability, and to be truthful, I think towards the end I was slowing down a bit at work. I'll find out tomorrow whether I was slow enough, careful enough, for Gerald. It's a good book, by the way. I don't pretend to know exactly what it's all about, but being forced to read it slowly allowed me to appreciate its intricacies of detail.

Three or four years ago, on one of the rare occasions these days when I read for pleasure, I was rereading *A Shropshire Lad* and I came to the poems that mention "the wind's twelve quarters", "the tree of man" and possibly other well-known book titles. I was particularly taken by the poem, number XXXI, whose first three words Vaughan Williams used as title for his setting of some of the poems, *On Wenlock Edge*:

On Wenlock Edge the wood's in trouble;

His forest fleece the Wrekin heaves;

Wondering whether Ursula Le Guin had taken the title of her book *The Wind's Twelve Quarters* directly from Housman or from Vaughan Williams, whose music I know she is fond of, I wrote and asked. I also mentioned that one day I might publish a fanzine called *The Wrekin Heaves*. She replied:

Directly from Housman. Grew up with his stuff, taking vast adolescent pleasure in the Gloom, & taking some of it to heart, too, such as Mithridates, he died old. — I like the VW settings very much, tho' apparently Housman didn't, but then, he didn't like anything a whole lot. ... I do believe THE WREKIN HEAVES is the title you have sought all your life without knowing it. — Was it you that produced Plumbers of the Cosmos? another of my favorites; but THE WREKIN HEAVES — man, that is class.

So now you know where the title comes from, and whatever you may think of the little I have written in these three pages, you have Ursula's word for it that at least the title has class.

And that, I'm afraid, is all there is this time.