

# IN THE NAME-OF-THE-FATHER

*Robert Zend's "Oāb" (or the up(Z)ending  
of trīdution)*

*Sherrill Grāce*

**I**T IS NOW FOUR YEARS since Exile Editions Limited of Toronto published its superbly printed and illustrated two-volume edition of Robert Zend's "NEOVEL" *Oāb*.<sup>1</sup> It is also four years since Robert Zend's untimely death. But to the best of my knowledge little has been said about the author or his extraordinary text, either since 1985 or before. Barry Callaghan, who nursed the volumes into print, once commented that

Robert Zend has applied with great wit all the gestures of mime, the optical illusions of Escher's logic, the play of concrete poetry, the psychology of paranoia and split personalities, and the closed literary circles of Borges to the creation of his extraordinary chronicle of a life collapsing into fullness, *Oāb*.

*(quoted from the cover)*

And he is to be commended for the fact that we have the book at all.

According to Zend's own version of the textual and publishing history, most of *Oāb* was written during two weeks in May of 1970 (*Oāb* 2, 204), and that was to prove the easy part. Except for a thirty-page excerpt in the literary quarterly *Exile*, in 1972, and despite praise from illustrious quarters (Northrop Frye, Robert Fulford, and Richard Kostelanetz), no one would publish Zend's combination of doodles, drawings, poems, and narrative. The years began to tick by: 1973, 1976, 1978 (and how about a video asks a man in Hollywood); in 1982 Exile Editions prepares to publish the work, but Zend has trouble finishing it. Then "in 1985, the final revised text is delivered to the printer. On the 27th of June, Zend dies. On the 2nd of July, he is buried. On the 16th of July, *Oāb* is born" (*Oāb* 2, 206). But what kind of book is it that inscribes its creator's obituary within the record of its own gestation? Or could there be some symbolic connection between the two? And who was Robert Zend anyway?

ZEND WAS BORN in Budapest in 1929 and, until his emigration to Canada during the 1956 Revolution, he worked as a columnist and cartoonist on various newspapers — this latter skill is important to keep in mind when reading *Oāb*.<sup>2</sup> He settled in Toronto where he continued to live and work for the next nineteen years, studying Italian at the University of Toronto, writing for the CBC and publishing poetry. By 1964 he was writing chiefly in English and, as the extensive play with language in *Oāb* demonstrates, he had an extraordinary gift and sensitivity for both the visual and aural effects of words. What is more, his English, with its playful neologisms and scatterings of real and invented diacritical marks, seems to echo, even parody, his native Hungarian.

If Robert Zend is to be remembered for his contribution to Canadian or post-modern literature, it will be for *Oāb*, a work that defies classification, unless we accept the narrator's own locution and call it "A NEOVEL." In some ways it reminds me of Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*. Although it is minimalist where the *Wake* is baroque (in its verbal super-abundance), it too is a night-book, a family romance, and a myth of paternity: for HCE read OAB. Or again, it recalls *Paradise Lost* as it goes about explaining the ways of Words to Man and charting our fall from bliss into the Symbolic order of language: for Satan read Oāb; for Adam (you and me) read Zënd. Because this book/work/text (for it is all three) is so unusual and unknown, I should describe it in some detail before venturing any interpretation or assessment, let alone conclusions about it.

The two volumes of *Oāb* contain twelve, well, "chapters" (sections, parts, units?) is what I'll call them, beginning with "The Conception of Oāb," whose position as titular hero is always open to debate and *différance*, and ending with "Transubstantiation." These twelve chapters are preceded by a series of nine photographs of Zend himself, starting with a full-colour close-up of his left eye on the cover and ending with a distance shot of Zend at his desk dreaming "Oāb." This last photograph faces the first page of the text, a holograph draft of poem/narrative describing Oāb. From this page of manuscript on, Zënd, the narrator who must not, of course, be confused with Robert Zend, experiments with every imaginable type of script, typeface, font, drawing, diagram, and cartoon, and with several genres of photographic reproduction in order to tell his tale. Just as volume one does not begin in the conventional manner, so volume two does not conclude as we expect. The last word of chapter twelve is the Name-of-the-Father: "Zënd!" (*Oāb* 2, 202), but the book continues for another thirty-five pages of heterogeneous materials: they are not always labelled, but I will call them appendices and they include textual and publishing history, "Table of Contents," excerpts from the galleys, Zënd's search for a sub-title (which fills the better part of a page and concludes jubilantly with "NEOVEL"), dedication, a prayer, visual footnotes and

explanations of symbols, and a post-oābian, historical document from the *Terrestrial Times* dated: “Zénday, Īrduary 15, 2985 A. O.”

In between chapters one and twelve, Zénd narrates his story of (and by) Oāb through elaborate, but always playful strategies of visualization, from traditional to concrete poems and passages of prose narration whose textuality is foregrounded typographically, to a variety of more obvious semiotic modes such as diagrams, games and puzzles (notably “Scrābble” and crosswords), specific indexical and iconic signs, comic strips and illustrations. For example, Zénd explains his creation of Oāb like this:

I understand you, my Oāb:  
before you, I  
may have physically  
looked like this:

ZĚND

but my soul was like this:

Z<sup>o</sup><sub>ā</sub><sup>B</sup>ĚND

that's how you grew in me

ZOĀBĚND

till I gave you life:

ZĚNDOĀB

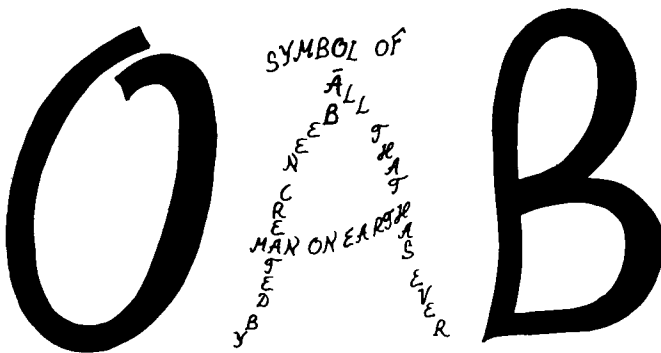
I needed you to find out what I am.

(Oāb 1, 78)

The act of verbal creation is literally visualized on the page for the reader as a swelling of vowels — the word heard (and seen) within the word — vowels that occupy space until they acquire an *apparently* independent life. That the independence is partial or apparent is underscored here, and Zënd’s misunderstanding of what has happened keeps the plot of the story moving. But this act of creation is visualized as a reciprocal gesture of Oāb’s creation of his soul (mate) Īrdu, for Oāb, you see, is not a conventional, passive novel character. He is an alphabetical construction, a word with pretensions to becoming the Word, to being the “Original Activating Breath” (*Oāb* 2, 236); he marks Zënd’s entry into the Symbolic order of language.

Zënd, however, thinks that Oāb is *his* creation, his brain-child, his son, and in the early pages of the text he boasts of his progenitive capacities and his ordinary status, and adopts a sometimes fatherly, sometimes avuncular tone as he teaches Oāb about the inevitable limitations of life. Oāb quickly becomes dissatisfied with his two-dimensional existence on the page; he dislikes being a mere word that can be erased, a phoneme that can be silenced, in a work that can be dismissed when Zënd goes away or wishes to see *his* friend Ardô. In short, Oāb rebels. “I decided to be like Zënd,” Oāb tells us, so Zënd sets him free to “be and create like God or me” (*Oāb* 1, 36). Oāb’s first act as an autonomous word is to create his own sidekick (son, friend, but sadly for Oāb, not inferior) Īrdu, who quickly completes the vicious circle Oāb has entered. Much of volume two develops and explores the consequences of this proliferating creation until, towards the end of what has already become a creation myth, at once an interrogation of origins and a narrative challenge to the Name-of-the-Father, Zënd warns an aging Oāb: “Be careful, my beloved. One day, Īrdu will grow and you too will . . .” (*Oāb* 2, 197).

If Oāb is a creation myth, it is one with a number of unique and startling features. The myth it inscribes and dramatizes is one of *human* creation which, like *Paradise Lost*, is also a story about a fall. As we are told in an oābian hieroglyph:



(*Oāb* 2, 189)

Language begets/conceives language; story begets/conceives more story in a kind of inverse and endless parthenogenesis. (I say inverse because Robert Zend's vision of creation is exclusively male.) According to the oābian mysteries, Oāb ("symbol of all that has ever been created by man on earth") chooses his author; the author has no say in the matter and he cannot escape his own fatal attraction to the creative enterprise. The irony and pathos of this dilemma is addressed in "Oāb's Lullaby," the closing and the darkest, most threatening passage in this otherwise light-hearted handling of metaphysical characters and ontological themes. Zēnd is left lying "stiff and with closed eyes" in the arms of his book; he has served his only function as a vehicle for a creation that always already exists because "real time flows backward—" (*Oāb* 2, 202). In the last analysis, it would appear that the creature kills his so-called creator just as, so Freud tells us, the son kills his father.

Although Zend's creation myth tips toward the tragic and elegiac in "Oāb's Lullaby," it must be remembered that Oāb is not the last word of the text; Zēnd is. By allowing his almost eponymous narrator the post-oābian words of the various appendices, Zend returns his myth to parody, to a carnivalesque de-crowning of Oāb himself. He also completes what I read as an elaborate parody of Christian myth, from *Genesis* to *Revelation*, in a typically postmodernist gesture that appropriates history and myth in order to reaccentuate them in a new *quaternity* of endless recreation. This enterprise reminds me of the visual world of Maurits Cornelius Escher whose play with mathematical formulae, investigation of perspective, and narcissistic reduplications of images are echoed (and acknowledged; see *Oāb* 2, 212-13) throughout Zēnd's text.<sup>3</sup> In *Oāb* Zend has created a deliberately, delightfully Escheresque *mise en oābime*!

**E**LSEWHERE I HAVE DISCUSSED *Oāb* as an essentially dialogic text because Bakhtinian theory provides an illuminating approach to the questions about discourse and authoring addressed by Zend.<sup>4</sup> None of the voices is finalized in this hybrid narrative where the other is always side-by-side with the author in a dialogue, and the story resists closure by giving the *ultimate* words to "Dr. Sylvester Staggeridge" in the *Terrestrial Times* for 2985 A.O. (precisely 1,000 years after the publication of *Oāb*). According to this theologian-historian, Professor of Neo-Oābian Studies and expert on the Lake Ontario Scrolls (which contain the *Oāb* text we are reading), theories about the Ancient Oābianist cult are "subject to change" whenever the government agrees to fund more research. Moreover, the theories this eminent professor leaves us with are quite preposterous and, with them, the text of *Oāb*, like the Möbius strip that Oāb and Īrdu play with/on (*Oāb* 2, 119-20), circles back on itself so that anything remains possible. *Caveat lector* (and *scriptor*)!

A Bakhtinian approach, however, is by no means the only pertinent guide to reading *Oāb*. Of even greater relevance, perhaps, are Lacan's views on the unconscious, language, narrative, and self-other definition. To undertake a Lacanian analysis of *Oāb* here and now is beyond my abilities and the space available, but a few words may evoke the larger absence to be explored and charted by future narratives about this text. First, *Oāb* is manifestly concerned with desire; it foregrounds and flaunts Zënd's desire, his acute awareness of an absent reality which he inscribes in (which *is*) the narrative of Oāb's creation. However, instead of approaching closer to the pre-symbolic realm of self and mother by exchanging the Name-of-the-Father for the phallus itself, Zënd (and Oāb after him in his creation of Īrdu) *necessarily* becomes more and more entangled in narrative. (Language, Lacan insists, precedes and is the condition for the unconscious.)<sup>5</sup> It is their narrative of endless creation that repeats, reveals, and re-presents that absent reality, the (M)other.

If his characters are inextricably caught up in their desire, in the dream world of the unconscious where we leave Zënd and Oāb at the end of the story (though *not* at the end of the narrative or the text), Robert Zend is not. Although he cannot free himself from the desire in/of language and narrative, he has refused to be cowed by it. The flamboyant textuality of *Oāb*, its verbal/visual pyrotechnics, its parody and characteristically postmodernist play with history, myth, and human desire succeed, I believe, in upending literary tradition, unveiling (could the semiotics of indexical and iconic signs assist in subverting?) the Symbolic order of language and releasing instinctual drives and repressed consciousness. In *Oāb* Zend acknowledges the Name-of-the-Father for what it is — a word: Zënd. The result is a postmodern creation myth and a Lacanian discourse in/through the unconscious like nothing else in Canadian literature. If Lacan is right that language precedes the unconscious and is the only way of gaining access to consciousness, then Robert Zend's *Oāb* is showing all of us who and where we are: literally, on the curve of the wor(1)d.



(*Oāb* 1, 50)

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> *Oāb*, 2 vols. (Toronto: Exile Editions, 1985). Zend did most of the artwork and layout, with help from Eydi Caines-Floyd.
- <sup>2</sup> For these few facts concerning Robert Zend, I am indebted to John Robert Colombo's entry on Zend in *The Oxford Companion to Canadian Literature*, ed. William Toye (Toronto: Oxford, 1983), 842. Colombo also worked with Zend on English versions of his poems: *Beyond Labels* (1972) and *From zero to one* (1973).
- <sup>3</sup> I would go further and say that Escher's vision has much in common with Zend's, and an investigation of the parallels between the two and of Zend's mimicking of Escher would reveal a good deal about Zend's method and philosophy. Zend dedicates *Oāb* to Escher and others such as Bach, Bartók, Blake, Magritte, Pirandello, and Rilke.
- <sup>4</sup> See "'Listen to the Voice': Dialogism and the Canadian Novel," *Future Indicative: Literary Theory and Canadian Literature*, ed. John Moss (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 1987), 129-31.
- <sup>5</sup> For Lacan's theories in translation, see *Écrits: A Selection*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Norton, 1977). For her discussion and analysis of Lacan I am indebted to Anika Lemaire, *Jacques Lacan* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1977).

## WORE DRESSES

*Dave Margoshes*

*Actor Charles Bronson says his family was so poor he started school wearing dresses outgrown by his sister.*

— news item

Mailer is wrong, isn't he  
 about tough guys, Charlie,  
 you and Papa both debuting  
 in skirts then going on  
 to help define the lay  
 of the land beneath,  
 giving weight to the roll  
 of flesh without bone  
 we can feel in our hands  
 without touching, by  
 senses alone.

Papa, your mother  
 decked you out in dresses  
 not because she yearned  
 for daughters in her life  
 but irony, the sense