
Off the Beat

The Gnome of the D.O.S.

Of all the mysteries surrounding higher learning, none has been more elusive than the passing on of jargon. As if by magic, on the day of his doctoral valediction, a reasonable man, who the night before was content to sit over a beer and talk about a "bump on the head," suddenly is inspired to write about "traumatic extradural intracranial hematomas" instead. How this ability to lapse, apparently at will, into reasoned incomprehensibility is transmitted from one generation of scholars to another has always remained an enigma.

But now the secret is out! While wandering through the cloisters of a major Northeastern university, our reporter happened to notice a huddled group of frightened novices being herded down an obscure passageway marked "D.O.S.—candidates only." Following the group, he soon came upon a subterranean gallery, lined from cobblestone floor to baroque ceiling with shelves of musty journals. Young men and women sat solemnly in a tier of straight-backed benches occupying the shadows in the rear of the cavern, while before them a gnarled and bent old man rasped his lecture before an aging blackboard. The Gnome of the D.O.S. had been discovered!

The Division of Obfusatory Sciences, our reporter later learned, was the earliest endowed department of that particular university, having resided in the same venerable grotto since the first building was constructed overhead some hundred years ago. More contributions to The Literature have originated here than any other spot on campus, he was told. While publishing no journals of their own, D.O.S. units of various schools apparently keep well in touch with advances in their field by sponsoring articles in the publications of every major learned society. So successful have their efforts been, and so faithful the allegiance of some graduates, that similar divisions have been established in every government agency, with a national headquarters below the National Security Council room in the basement of the White House. After great effort, our reporter gained permission to conduct the first on-the-record interview with a D.O.S. Gnome, and he began by asking for translations of several recent examples in the field.

"I found this one in the March 8 NATURE magazine," he began. "It in-



volves 'bipedal saltation of macropodids' and I wonder if you can tell me what it means: 'The macropodid tarsal structure allows effective ricochet function by transfer of weight through the calcaneum. The fact that their phalangerid ancestors had already developed syndactyly and the use of digit IV as their main support digit thus predetermined the type of cursorial specialization possible in the macropodid hind limb.'

"Oh yes," replied the Gnome. "That's from one of our West Coast correspondents. It says 'Kangaroos hop because they have big feet.'"

"I see," said our correspondent. "What about this one from the March 22 SCIENCE: 'A diarrhea-producing toxin from a blue-green alga, *Microcystis aeruginosa* Kützing, was obtained from standing laboratory cultures. The nondialyzable fraction of the lysate from whole cells produced fluid accumulation in the ligated small intestinal loops of guinea pigs.'"

"Hee! Hee!" chuckled the Gnome, who was warming to his task. "He's trying to say that if you drink water with scum in it, you're likely to get sick. I always prefer expressing things straightforwardly: 'Toxic phytoplankta can be etiological agents of gastroenteritis.' Isn't that much better?"

"Much," replied the reporter, a little shaken. "Do you know anything about 'hyperthermic vectors of oligospermia?'"

"Oh, medicine's my favorite!" replied the Gnome.

"Good, here's a piece from the March 4 JOURNAL OF THE AMERICAN MEDICAL ASSOCIATION: 'The effect of intrascrotal hyperthermia upon the spermatogenesis of man and lower

animals has been observed irrespective of the mode of induction. . . . The deleterious effect on spermatogenesis depends on intensity, duration and frequency of the hyperthermic exposure and variances in individual susceptibility to intrascrotal hyperthermia.'"

The Gnome lost all control and rolled on the floor in a fit of laughter. "I told you medicine was my favorite," he wheezed after composing himself. "What that says is that men who take too many hot baths may become temporarily sterile; some people think that sort of thing may have led to the fall of the Roman Empire."

"Really? May I bother you with just this last one; I've worried about this ever since last year's Nobel Prize lectures. One of the gentlemen was saying that all sorts of important new electronic devices are possible because of discovery of negative resistance to electron flow through semiconductors with resonance transmission in their quantized potential barriers. Something to do with matching the electron de Broglie wavelength with the superlattice spacing of a substance's Brillouin zone, if I remember correctly.

"I'm sorry," replied the Gnome. "Some things in physics simply cannot be translated. Besides, when a man wins the Nobel Prize he has to go to the Head Gnome for a special course in 'Interjection of foreign and Latinate phrases.'"

"But what's the purpose of all this obfuscation training?" asked our exasperated correspondent.

"Why," winked the Gnome, "to keep science writers like yourself in business."

—John H. Douglas