

HOWARD BERGERSON'S SURPRISE SYMPHONY

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1. Overture: The Innovative Palindromic Poetry of Howard Bergerson

The stylistic idiosyncrasies of Howard Bergerson's published palindromes have long puzzled critics who have admired his artistry without quite understanding it. When Dmitri Borgmann, for one, reviewed Bergerson's *Palindromes and Anagrams* (Dover, 1973) in the November 1973 *Word Ways*, he did his best to give his friend's book a positive critique. Concerning the core of the work, Bergerson's own palindromes and their introductory notes, Borgmann described the palindromes as being "delightful," "graceful" and "a pleasure to read, inducing a sense of euphoria in the reader," and commended Bergerson's engaging commentary for "impart[ing] to palindromes . . . a status, a dignity and a future they have not heretofore possessed." Nonetheless, Borgmann could not honestly refrain from mentioning what he considered a serious fault in many of Bergerson's sotadics, namely, their relative lack of intelligibility, observing that they "suffer . . . from a certain nebulosity of thought." With characteristic impatience, he dismissed Bergerson's efforts to explain and justify the style of his palindromes as an attempt to "rationalize away" an admitted defect. (To be fair, Bergerson's explication of his stylistic intent *had* been something less than pellucid.) Clearly, to Borgmann, "nebulosity" in sentence palindromes could only be considered a flaw—an understandable and unavoidable one perhaps, but an undeniable flaw all the same.

To Borgmann, as to many other palindromists then and now, one's objective in composing a palindromic sentence is straightforward: one simply tries to achieve the best lucidity, propriety of language and naturalness of expression that palindromicity and the rules of grammar permit. That there might exist another, equally legitimate approach to the composition of palindromic sentences, one that sacrifices a measure of lucidity in order to access a richer, more striking and complex vocabulary, may have been a notion that had only occurred to Howard Bergerson at that point in time. And therein lay both his and Borgmann's difficulty. Although he was probably not conscious of the parallel, Bergerson's situation was analogous to that of the first Impressionist painters of the 19th century, who de-emphasized realism in painting (just as Bergerson was to de-emphasize lucidity in palindromes) in order to pursue certain less obvious, but equally valid, artistic objectives and effects. Borgmann and many others, meanwhile, were left to play the part of the reactionary artistic traditionalists who simply do not "get" those divergent goals.

Whether or not it is correct to call Howard Bergerson the world's first impressionist palindromist, the interesting question remains of just what it is that makes his palindromic poetry so immediately identifiable. One might point, for example, to the uncommonly high ratio of long words to short words in Bergerson's palindromes, and yet they are not unique in this regard; Jeff Grant's "Longest Palindrome" (*Word Ways*, August, 1977), for instance, exhibits a similarly high ratio of long words to short ones, and yet it does not bear any great stylistic resemblance to Bergerson's palindromes. So what *are* the characteristic elements of Bergerson's distinctive palindromic style? Besides ingenuity, three that come to mind are his unusual "phrasal" method of palindrome construction, his readiness to trade some intelligibility for enhanced lexical color, and his conception of palindromes as poetry, with poetry's functions to perform. To elaborate:

First, unlike most palindromists who typically compose their palindromic sentences two reversal or semi-reversal words at a time, Bergerson typically commenced with an initial pair of reversal *phrases*, for which purpose he assembled lists of such phrase pairs. (One or two long words usually seed these reversal phrase pairs, which helps to explain the high proportion of long words in his palindromes.) He was given a trove of such reversal phrase pairs by Leigh Mercer, to which he added others of his own discovery, and in the February, 1969 issue of *Word Ways* he offered readers a sampling of this collection, such

items as “la dolce vita // amative clod,” etc. The distinctive look of many of his palindromes is in large part the consequence of their having been constructed around one or more such reversal phrase pairs.

Second, palindromists who strive for coherence, clarity and naturalness of language in their compositions are confronted by the prosaic fact that most “natural” language, and especially spoken language, consists largely of palindromically unexciting short words. This being so, ought palindromists really to *want* to make themselves the slaves of “natural” language? Instead, why not *de-emphasize* coherence, clarity and so forth in palindromes in order to enable a more select, stimulating and esthetically appealing vocabulary which employs longer words? Bergerson seems to be proposing something of the sort when he writes, in *Palindromes and Anagrams*, that perhaps palindromists ought “to try to make something new and different *via words as such* [Bergerson’s italics], letting their meanings go hang, relatively...” Replace “words as such” with “colors as such” in that suggestion, and you might have an Impressionist painter’s credo.

Third, Bergerson invariably presented his palindromes as poetry. If his results too often seem only a caricature of poetry, blame it on the considerable logological constraints under which he toiled and not on his muse, for not even the most adept of palindromists can be expected simply to neutralize, somehow, those expression-impeding limitations. And let us not forget that Bergerson *did* sometimes succeed, against imposing odds, in crafting a persuasive facsimile of genuine poetry—or was it the reality of it?

Loop, dip, mild natal fay, by a water.
Fret away by a flat and limpid pool.

To id: If I, an emoter, cannot fight or fall,
Or, frustrated, I bay and do sit—’tis odd.
Nay! Abide, tart surf! Roll a froth gift on nacre to me—
Naïf idiot.

Not only did Bergerson see palindromes as poetry; “poetry,” he declares in his book, “is evocation.” Perhaps this explains why one may haply see a *senile heresiologist*, *urceolate Nita*, *veer as a swallow* amid *celestial lives*, *mellific Ida*, *eleemosynary tramps* and all of their *etymological ilk* in these palindroverses.

2. Bergerson’s Surprise Symphony, or, the Dance of the Ten Dozen Latent RETEP Quatrains

An uncommon variety of palindromic verse which has attracted some attention is rhyming, end-to-end-palindromic (RETEP) verse. A “proper” RETEP verse is a verse which is a single palindrome and which has at least four rhymed lines expressing at least two different rhymes; permissible rhyme schemes include ABAB, AABB and the limerick and sonnet rhyme patterns. Metricity is desirable. To date, a total of eight intrepid palindromists, by my count, have published some variety of letter-unit RETEP verse.

Howard Bergerson composed only one *explicit* RETEP verse (one of the first two letter-unit RETEP verses ever published, it is shown on the next-to-last page of this article). *Implicit* RETEP verses, however, are another matter. As “excerpts” from the fictive opera “O Tongue in Cheek,” Bergerson presented in his book *Palindromes and Anagrams* a total of 15 examples of what might be called “bipalindromic rhyming quatrains,” quatrains in which there is an ABAB rhyme pattern and in which the first two lines and the second two lines are separately palindromical. It is hard to say why Bergerson should have composed so many of these odd quatrains, but one possibility is that he first entertained, and then abandoned, an intention to try to convert all of them to RETEP quatrains. Whatever his reason, RETEP verse devotees may be pleased that he did publish so many, as it happens to be a general property of bipalindromic rhyming quatrains that their four lines may be reordered to form no fewer than *eight* different true RETEP quatrains—four with an ABAB rhyme pattern and four with an AABB rhyme pattern. To the RETEP verse enthusiast, this seems like a terrific bargain any way you look at it.

Here is how it is done: Say that the rhyme-words at the ends of the four lines of a bpalindromic rhyming quatrain are, in order, (1) Able, (2) Brew, (3) Cable and (4) Drew; here are the eight ways in which the lines those words represent can be reordered to create eight different true RETEP quatrains:

<u>ABAB Rhyme Pattern</u>				<u>AABB Rhyme Pattern</u>			
1 Able	2 Brew	3 Cable	4 Drew	1 Able	2 Brew	3 Cable	4 Drew
4 Drew	3 Cable	2 Brew	1 Able	3 Cable	4 Drew	1 Able	2 Brew
3 Cable	4 Drew	1 Able	2 Brew	4 Drew	3 Cable	2 Brew	1 Able
2 Brew	1 Able	4 Drew	3 Cable	2 Brew	1 Able	4 Drew	3 Cable

Thus, the 15 bpalindromic rhyming quatrains that Bergerson exhibits in *Palindromes and Anagrams* imply a theoretical total of 120 (!) different latent RETEP quatrains waiting to be reordered into existence. Owing to mainly to semantic incongruities, however, probably fewer than half of these theoretical RETEP quatrains are practicably realizable. Experiment suggests that about 10% of such reordered quatrains can function adequately as RETEP verse with only minor adjustments to their language, about 35% can be made more or less semantically coherent and grammatically correct with moderate to extensive revision, and the remaining 55% defy practicable remediation. As might be expected, the overall coherence of the reordered quatrains is generally not very good, but to be fair neither is that of their parent bpalindromic rhyming quatrains, in most cases. (Indeed, the thematic coherence of most of the reordered and emended RETEP quatrains exhibited below is actually somewhat better than it is in their precursor verses.)

We know that Bergerson must have used something like this technique to build his lone explicit RETEP verse (“Rail at natal bosh...”) because only half of that quatrain is cited in Borgmann’s 1965 book *Language on Vacation*—Bergerson had evidently not yet composed the other half. Whether or not he fully apprehended that *all* of his 15 bpalindromic rhyming quatrains might, by similar means, be converted to RETEP quatrains is unclear. However that may be, the significant thing for would-be composers of four-line RETEP verse is that this technique could represent a quicker and easier (if perhaps less artistic) way of composing RETEP quatrains than the usual, more daunting all-four-lines-at-once method. But does this alternative method really suffice? Here is the result of one attempt to build a RETEP quatrain from scratch employing what might be called the “Bergerson transposal” technique:

Pan slid off a daffodil’s miry rim;
 Amidst angel fits, Otto naved Elio’s sap!
 As so I led Eva not to stifle gnats dim,
 A miry rim slid off a daffodil—*snap!*

Though this verse does scan fairly well, note its marked lack of thematic continuity from line to line. But let us look at some other examples. Here are RETEP reorderings of ten of Bergerson’s 15 bpalindromic rhyming quatrains: the number to the left of a quatrain indicates its number in the interrupted sequence of these quatrains in his book, and the numbers to its right denote the positions of its lines in its parent verse.

- | | | |
|----|--|------------------|
| 1) | “Flu galled an illiterate elf snob,” big Dirce a maiden woos;
“Flow, alas, solo, cosmic orc—a lily motif use!
Sufi, to my lilac roc, I’m <i>so</i> colossal a wolf,
So <i>owned</i> I am! (Acrid gibbons fleet <i>are</i> , till, in a dell, a gulf...)” | 1
3
4
2 |
| 2) | “Spill a <i>Germ</i> or <i>Feral</i> bit, Alcestis! O play, or—la!— <i>erase</i> villagers’
Regal lip! Sibilate verbal <i>ice</i> , crisp as serif tips!”
“Fresh serf spitfires <i>sap</i> Sir Cecil,” a brevet alibis pillagers’
“Regal” lives. “A <i>real</i> royal posits <i>éclat!</i> ” I blare from regal lips. | 3
2
1
4 |

- 3) “An *anadem?*” I ranted, row on. “*Mahogany?* No, Miladi Baroness! ‘Apostolate Roma’— 3
 A *mock*-radiant esteem!” “Oh, wet a diffid deli and amass arcana!” 2
 Lana, crass, a mad, nailed diffid ate. “*Who* meets Etna? *I*, dark coma!” 1
 “Amoret, a lot so *passé?* No rabid alimony *nag*, O ham? No word-Etna rimed, anana?” 4
 (“diffid”: in science fiction, a large, homicidal vegetable—*Palindromicon II*)
- 8) Revocable memory, blab at a stray’s sordid alimony raid: 4
 “Diana? Sit rapt—so melts a chassé legato of her, 1
 Eh, ‘foot ageless’!” (Ah, castle most partisan, *aid!*) 2
 “Diary? No, miladi, drossy Art’s atabal—by Rome, Melba, cover!” 3
- 9) Nurse ye no yen o’ melody, Rana Cyrano— 3
 On a limb, Elban, I pistol ecotone tone dun! 2
 (Nude, note not ocelots—I pin a bleb!) Milano? 1
 On *ary* “canary,” dole money; on “eyes,” *run!* 4
- 10) Advice to a lovelorn vampiress from an incarcerated Count Dracula?
 Maiden! If no craft so melts a chaste bat-lover, 3
 Eva, cruor-evocator gay, be “live” (yet net no “clam”)! 2
 A “malcontent eye, vile by a grot”? A *cover* 1
 Our cave revolt abets! Ah, castle most far, *confined* I am! 4
- 11) When he goes on superduty, superhero Foilerman shifts into Herospeak:
 “Mood, Folio? ‘Famine, *fatal?*’ I attach turban! 3
 I nab rude Villa ere disc is umbra, groom! 2
 O Moor, garb music—sidereal-lived, *urban!* 1
 I nab, Ruth, cattail at a fen—I’m a Foil of Doom!” 4
- 12) “Dogma-of-Nowism idol? Ah, sore defiled! 2
 Dually, bishops’ *argots*, alas, are now reviled! 4
 O, to deliver won eras—alas, to *grasp*, oh Sibyl!—*Laud!*” 3
 De-lifed, Eros’ halo dims... “*I won, foam god!*” 1
 (The archbishop’s revenge?)
- 14) *Flow*, erose song of war—nor after fade, 3
 Snide diadem! Mirth, gild no fey Aesir! (Alas, drab Ulf...) 2
 “Stiff? It’s *flu*, bard Sal—arise! Aye, fond light-rimmed aide,” 1
 Dins Eda, “fret far on raw fog, nose-sore wolf!” 4
- 15) Elated is debased Oberon: “So that ‘solid,’ Elam—inane vow— 3
 ‘Woe may *any* stray ray dole Magnolia Estates’ pug noses pale!’— 2
Did elapse? Song!” Upset, at sea, I long: “A melody, artsy Ary? Nay? A *meow*, 1
 Woven animal Ed?...” I lost. Ah, to snore bodes a bedside tale... 4

True, these examples also exhibit frequent thematic discontinuities between lines, but remember that Bergerson could not have anticipated that his bpalindromic rhyming quatrains would be subjected to RETEP verse reordering and thus had no reason to try make their constituent parts thematically compatible. So it seems fair to say at this point that while the *mechanical* feasibility of the “Bergerson transposal” RETEP verse compositional technique has been amply demonstrated, its *semantical* adequacy remains unproven.

3. Encore:

Dicacity laid roses
In a nose so placid;
I revere veridical poses
On anises, or dialytic acid.

For an encore, one last RETEP quatrain (many others could be contrived) created from the reassortment of a palindromic poem composed by Howard Bergerson. Bards, regown hero | Howard Bergerson!

Appendix: A Gallery of Other RETEP Verses, the Vox Populi, and Some “Pruned” Poems

Rail at “natal bosh,” aloof gibbon!
(Snob-bird named “Red Rose of Mine Desire”!)
Rise, denim foes! Order—*demand* ribbon,
Snob! Big fool! Ah, so blatant a liar!

~ Howard W. Bergerson, *Word Ways*, Feb. 1969

“Draw, O hot moody sword girder-on!
Draw, or foot it! O, negate wit! *On!*”
“Not I—wet age!—not I! Too froward!”
(No red-rig, drowsy doom to Howard...)

~ James A. Lindon, *Word Ways*, Feb. 1969

“Maria, I kayak on Spam!
Pacer, am *I* on Pan-Am!”
Smiles Selim’s ma. “Nap?
No, I’m a recap—
Maps? No, Kay—a *Kia I ram!*”

~ Lori Wike, *Word Ways*, Aug. 2017

Otherworld

No gardener posing in ebony,
No Melos saved, no flagon,
No gal fond (Eva’s so lemony!)
No benign isoprene dragon.

~ Jeff Grant, *Word Ways*, Nov. 2010

Minstrel, Maudlin

Here’s Olaf: “O, Tibetan! I’m effete, yes—
Set, sir, to tenor poem or flowery lay;
Ay, a ‘lyre-wolf Romeo’, prone to *tristesse*,
Yet effeminate! . . . Bit of a loser, eh?”

~ Jim Puder, *Word Ways*, Feb. 2010

So, what do people say about RETEP verse—is the world at large even aware of it? Apparently, it is; in a recent troll of the Web, no fewer than six mentions of the “joli genre” (as we call it) were found, to wit:

“Sums are, Emir Peter, *not* set as a test on ‘RETEP’ rime!” ~ Erasmus

“I roamed under abas as ‘RETEP-Rime Eremite Tim’—*ere*, Emir Peters, as a ‘bared, nude Maori!’”

“Won’t I repaper, Stella, Emir Peter’s sadass ‘RETEP’ rime?” “Al, let’s repaper it *now*.”

“Egad! A base-toned ‘RETEP’ rime, Emir Peter, denotes a *bad* age!”

“‘*Emir* Peter,’ Elban mad, was I, ere I saw damnable ‘RETEP’ rime!”

“Live *not* on evil ‘RETEP’ verse, dire demon-gnome,” derides Rev. Peter, “live not on *evil!*”

Buried within several of Bergerson's longer palindromes in Palindromes and Anagrams are passages of a few lines' length which cleave relatively closely to a single topical theme. Liberated from their dissimilar contexts and provided with whatever additional language and other alterations might be needed to retain palindromicity and grammar, such passages can constitute perfectly satisfactory end-to-end-palindromic poems in their own right. Below, topiarily pruned of their riotous overgrowth, are several such verdant verses as Bergerson might have sculpted them had he been content to let them remain ornamental shrubs and not tried to grow them into shade trees. Roughly 35% of their foliage has been newly grafted on.

Aphrodite's Complaint

Solemnities are Mood's *doom*, gods erase it!
In Melos, on *desserts* I lived!
I *merit* tasseltops, rose calyxes, sly rebozo beryls,
Sexy laces or spotless attire—
Mid evil, I stressed no solemnities!
Ares' dog, "Mood's Doom"—*erase* it in Melos!

Robbin' Hood, the Elf

Masses revel! "Big elf on a mayonnaise man!"
"A tinsel baton-dragging nice elf, too!" lisp, oh
Sibyl, dragging "Nipping Nola" along! Oh!
Boring, I lamb and naïve viand nab; *malign*, I rob!
Hog Nola along nipping niggardly bishops, I loot!
Fleecing niggard notables Nita names,
I annoy a "Man of Legible Verses"—Sam!

The Sub-Editor

Dele 'm,' martyr!
Alas, no *Noslin News* "god" am I:
"Em, was *not* Nat's 'Torsade' *lucid*?
...I *revise* it?"
I sob.

"Revel, Bali miss! A nude tide, *id*, ["id"?] is in!
O dare her, Adonis..."

I did—
I edited unassimilable verbosity I've ridiculed as "rot"—
Stanton saw me!
I'm a dog, Swen Nilson, on salary—trammed!

Flowers of Autumn

Red, now, is a late-petal era.
We fade: lucid Iris, red Rose of Sharon, "Pop" Yam;
Goldenrod a silly ram ate, wan...
O sad! A lid off a daffodil—Ada's!—
On a wet, amaryllis-adorned log!
Maypop Norah's foe's orders (I ridiculed a few)
Are late, pet? Alas, I wonder...