DR. AWKWARD AND OLSON IN OSLO

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The long voyage between my first tentative effort at constructing a short palindrome of some forty letters, and the eventual comple­tion of a palindromic novel numbering 31,594 words (or approxi­mately 104,000 letters) some twenty years later, was an unrelent­ing lesson in many disciplines. There were lessons in trial and error, in logic, in vocabulary, in syntactics, and a wide-ranging lexical development that I never thought possible. Although I had always considered myself a more than ordinary lover of my native language, I had never before realized how metamorphic and submis­sive was this extraordinary English tongue, until the day I began manipulating its words, letter by letter, for palindromic composi­tion.

I wrote my first extended palindrome in 1960. It came to 170 words (or 600 letters). I tried to give it as much sense as possible, and in this matter I think I clearly succeeded. For no particular reason I called my essay SO DO DODOS, and in verse form it read as follows:

Tacit, I hate gas,
(aroma of evil), a nut, sleep,
no melons, drawers, bars,
Eta Delta, ebon, a hare, macaroni,
stone raps, id, a lass lion,
apses, ore, lines, a loner, war -
oh, bait I hate! - jam, ugh;
cabs, wars too, spas, Odin, rocs.

I revile dope, naps, a wagon -
add a sob - oh, damn it!
(so do dodos, ahem) - lepers? mark up a love -
spis, editors, tops, rime, denim,
repose (alas, simoleons), loops, rats, gals,
a tar bag and a maniac Cain,
a mad nag, a brat, a slug star, spools,
Noel - O Miss Al Aesop, ermined emirs,
pots, rot I despise; Volapuk,
rans repel me (ha! so do dodos),
tin, mad hobos, add a nog,
a wasp, an epode, liver.

I scorn "I do," sap, soot, straws,
Bach, gum - a jet? ah, it I abhor -
a wren? O la! senile roses, pan oils, salad;
I spare not sin or a camera (ha!

As in 1980.

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On the spellings, etc. I also
spellings cautious of
abreviations S.O.S.,
"SAM X., MA
A LAME GOL.
"A PAP? EC
NEVER! ON
TAG OR BAIZ
Constructing such a colossal, unrelenting, and side-ranging composition was a tremendous undertaking. Although I had my native tongue and submitted the result to the Guinness Book of World Records. I was astonished when they declared me the world recordholder for the year 1975.

As champion, I didn't rest on my laurels; on the other hand, I didn't pursue the subsequent record holders with marked assiduity. Over a period of time, the idea of writing a palindromic novel replaced the fruitless pursuit of mere length. When I fully accepted, I stopped adding to the endless word game and for a year or so considered the novelistic possibilities. If anything, I realized the enormity of the task, and decided to concentrate as much time and effort as I could spare. Approximately four hours of work per day went into the effort, or about 100 hours per month. I completed the novel in five months.

As in all palindromes, impeccable honesty was essential. One must not cheat by inventing words or coining new spellings. During the first days I wanted to be a purist. Use only common English words was the dictum: no variable spellings, no oddments, no obscure names of places or peoples, no obsolete words, no foreign phrases or Latinisms masquerading as good English. But of course this was all quite impossible. I soon settled down to the best I could do with the English approved by fifteen dictionaries, encyclopedias and other reference volumes for the final verdict on the existence and spelling of unusual words.

On the other hand, I was extremely cautious with alternative spellings, for example using or rather than our in labor, honor, etc. I almost always chose the American rather than the English spellings in such words as woolen and traveler. I was likewise cautious on the alternative spellings of place names such as Suriname/Surinam, Nineveh/Ninevah, etc. I also made use of occasional abbreviations, but these, for the most part, were in common usage: S.O.S., O.K., i.e., Mr., lb., re, AE (the writer), and the like.

"SAM X., MANY A FEZ I ABROGATE, NOT FEW AT SOME CIDEVANT FEDERAL CEDING. I LAME GOLA - NOR EVEN DR. AWKWARD, Ti, YASI, E., ROME, C. NOT N.E.P., ERO, A MA (MOM) - OH, ECCE PAPA!"

"A PAP? ECCE HOMO, MAMA! O REPENT! ONCE MORE I SAY IT!" DR. AWKWARD: "NEVER! ON A LOGE MALIGN I DECLARE DEFT NAVE DICE - MOST. A WEFT, ONE TAG OR BAIZE. FAY NAM, XMAS..."
EVIL? O ERA, SELAH! EVEN IN NINEVAH SORE HELP MET ON TIME IS EVIL OR EVILED.
DELIVER OLIVES? I EMIT NO TEMPLE HERO'S HAVEN. IN NINEVER ALES ARE OLIVE.

But all writers of palindromes realize that it is in the short effort that the whole is the final beauty:

**FOOL ALOOF**

**EMIL S. ELBERT SAW TRALEE 3-EEL ART WAS TREBLE SLIME**

**MURDER? NOT SO. BOSTON RED RUN**

Yet it is also evident that in a protracted palindrome the parts become the reigning interest; and although the whole is a colossus to be admired and honored, the parts are the links of the marathon chain composed of spliced emordnilaps that run to the exact center of the palindrome where, on the other side, the emordnilaps continue with their new sense to the completion of the palindrome.

Which brings us to that perfect word which will one day certainly find its way into the English lexicon. Emordnilap is a fine inversion or reverse spelling of palindrome. Who first thought of it? And how long ago? Emordnilap is the perfect designation for a word, phrase or sentence that makes different sense when read backwards:

**ED, I CLASP MURFREESBORO**

**0, ROB SEER FRUMPS, ALCIDE!**

**SOT! TO TASTE VICTUAL MUFFINS, I DO SO SNIFF ARABLE GUMS.**

**SMUG ELBA! R.A.F. FINS? 0, SOD! I SNIFF UMLAUT CIVETS AT OTTO'S.**

**BOSNIA PAIN! A MONOMANIA PETAL! LIES! O RARE WOMAN AMONG ANIMALS!**

**SLAM! I NAG NO MAN! A MOWER AROSE ILL, ATE PAIN, A MONOMANIA PAIN - SOS!**

Thus, inevitably, and because he has no choice, the composer of a palindromic novel becomes a tailor of words. He lays out hundreds of small emordnilaps, and stitches them all together in their assigned places, with the finished product the gigantic palindrome that forms the whole work. And the exact center becomes the hinge of the composition while, irrevocably, the story on both sides must proceed to its destined end, quite as if the hinge were nonexistent. It was the hinge that created for me the principal problem of the novel.

It is evident that I had to keep constantly in mind two elements: (1) palindrome-emordnilap, and (2) development of the story. I had little trouble mapping out the argument. The title, Dr. Awkward & Olson in Oslo, were two names removed from a previous palindrome, and they gave me instant inspiration. The book, I decided, would be a modern morality play in the form of a detective-chase novel. It would be a contest between Dr. Awkward, a man of unrelied vice, criminality, corruption and knavery, the avatar of absolute immorality on earth, and Olson in Oslo, the manifestation of human goodness and moral eloquence, a strong wise old graybeard, the conscience of the planet.
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"Several signal fate years — Anno domini. Peep it, sir pasha. Tardy ord. eta lac seegars, Dr. awkward."

Thus every character speaks a private tongue that often has the most tenuous relationship to the conversation or problem at hand. Yet these characters do not spout nonsense. Each aside, each digression, each stream of conscious or unconscious babble leads to the resolution of a problem or a reflection. Dialogue is often like the fractured, tortuous dreams of sleep where events occur with only the frailest conjunction with what has passed. But words are bricks, and some are mortar, and both are masoned into place by the author who alone knows the scenario and the path he is taking, and that each digression contributes to the forward movement of the story, and to the validity of the emordnilaps that occur dozens of pages in the future.

"Won I? Odd, I vote with guatemalan air dahlias."

"Sail hadrian. A lame taught I wet ovid. Do I now?"

One panel. Lows roes. O, tame dessert camel as a camelopard I do not ever give dam — eh? Hen, a devi. Greve (tono) did rap ole mac, a salem actress edematose or swollen ape — no?

The novel is replete with like eccentricities, dottiness, oddities, a veritable circus of them. There is an endless succession of oafish blunders and clumsy performances. Each persona is a palindromic grotesque, in character as well as name:

- 'Red' N. Axel Alexander
- Otto l. Giotto
- Lear S. Israel
- Toilet Eliot
- Lisa B. Basil
- Emil S. Slime
- E. Sion Noise

And scores of others.

They are all showoffs, punsters, exhibitionists, masters of logomachy and periphrasis. They swashbuckle even in sleep. They are not verbal tricksters — it is their only mode of speech. The inversion of phrases, the syntactical upsidedownness, the swarms of ideas, the interest in every singularity about them are made as natural as possible, consistent with the flow of the story. And, to one’s surprise, the eccentric soon becomes the commonplace, and the reader, to his pleasant confoundment, accepts the strangeness as the norm. So or so hopes.

"Oh, my lips send, (sam x. x).

A time, s. not, he musi

"Sail always

'polish a

'pirates

'A not see

'Tse rot?

Ksi. remo, & skees wens a tub. D. ofe yod, esr.

"Dr. awkward

Fat sult, o"

A final in the form not disingenuous. Other persons, it were, to poster of reco...
"EMOTE NO LLAMA'S ROD! IN GOD WE TRUST TO SEW ON BUTTONS. A RO DIPS UCAYALI. BOB, I BURBLE, GOD WOT, STATIC SO-SO GOLD OG & SIX ARPS. CRAM, NI SAGRA, PETS ADE CAFE. HE'S ORAN, OSLO."

But eventually we reach a crisis. Midway in the novel, as in every palindrome, a point is reached beyond which there is no return, except to backtrack, letter by letter, to the exact tota of the beginning. It is the point of the hinge. It is, in sum, the precise spot where the forward half of the palindrome begins to recite itself backward, and the backward half becomes the forward. In the novel, it occurs on page 83. Dr. Awkward, imprisoned, raves and mews at his unaccustomed situation - and the center of the universe becomes his own name.


Thus, here, at last, the novel breasts its divide and plunges on to its foretold conclusion. The plot marches forward. Dr. Awkward is tried, justiced. He is convicted, condemned. He is shipped to a far Helena in the mid-Pacific, and the planet breathes easier.

On page 160 Sam X. Xmas addresses his friends and acolytes.

"OH, MY PEOPLE, DO NOT LUST AFTER GERONIJCS OR AFTER OMAHA. REGAL LIPS SEND, 0 OG! DR. AWKWARD, TIG, ID, A DENIM AXE WON."

SAM X. XMAS ASKED: "DO I MAKE SENSE? DO YE FOLLOW? NOW ONE ON A TIME, S. PARNELL, AN AVATAR, REFLECTED. BUT A RED NULLIFIDIAN I AM NOT, HE MUSED. ALBEIT HE WENDED NEW SEEKS & REMARKED: 'SAIL ALWAYS PER MAPS.' ‘POLISH A POLICY AT SOME RISK.’ ‘PIRATES INOSCUULATE.’ ‘A NOT SECRET SIN IS A SIN IF LAID TO REST.’"

A final question. Why did I write Dr. Awkward & Olson in Oslo in the form I chose - as a novel? My final answer, I hope, is not disingenuous. I wrote the novel because to my knowledge no other person had ever composed an equal nonesuch. I decided, as it were, to be the first. And perhaps now that the first is a matter of record, there will be a rash of similar novels, some better, some worse.